

# Father involvement in a comprehensive elementary school: building capacity and understanding

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – As part of a larger grant-funded project, a professional development (PD) series was conducted within the framework of a school–university partnership to improve teachers' capacity to meaningfully include fathers and father figures in the school environment, with a particular focus on fathers of children with disabilities. The authors sought to understand the extent to which a school-wide PD framed through the lens of a father of a child with a disability might inform practice with sustainable implementation. Due to the pandemic, the original format of the PD was redesigned for virtual delivery.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A three-phase data collection and analysis approach included a pre-PD survey, a post-PD survey and a one-year follow-up survey. All surveys included both quantitative and qualitative self-report data components.

**Findings** – Results suggest school personnel found the virtual PD valuable, gleaned several useful strategies for reflecting on their own practices, working to improve communication with families of children with disabilities and more meaningfully including fathers and father figures in future school-related activities and programming.

**Research limitations/implications** – First, the sample size of the present study was small, and participation was variable across PD sessions. In addition, participants self-selected into the series, and therefore, they may be more likely to value father-figure involvement with or without participation in the PD series. The small sample size may minimize the generalizability of these results across other replicable settings and participants. Second, the results of the pre-PD survey could be positively skewed since the university partner's initial delivery of PD related to this topic began in 2018. In the pre-PD survey, the majority of respondents indicated, as an example, that they believed father involvement was correlated with higher academic achievement. It is not clear if respondents held these beliefs independently at the inception of the partnership or if they perhaps learned of these connections during an earlier PD offered by the authors.

**Practical implications** – The current study offers a small glimpse into the world of a school–university partnership and its ability to actualize meaningful reflection on family engagement practices. Results also indicate a greater awareness of significant male figures/fathers and their needs. Content delivered during each PD supports capacity building in terms of teachers' ability to see fathers and father figures as meaningful contributors within the context of the school environment. Participants mentioned that the PD taught them ways to recognize and remediate some of the insidious communication barriers that exist.



**Social implications** – Participants stated that they grew in their understanding of intentional connections with significant male figures, noting a concerted effort to ensure communication of information pertaining to school events, conferences and, in some cases, individualized educational programs (IEPs). Staff members also felt as though the pandemic fostered greater connections with fathers who were working at home and who were simultaneously helping their children access online learning platforms. However, it is noteworthy that the latter benefit was likely a positive side effect of mandatory home-based learning as opposed to a direct result of the present study. Socially, the authors all find ourselves embarking on a bit of social uncertainty, where perhaps it is no longer appropriate or significant to mention one's gender. Nonetheless, the research highlights the unique contributions that fathers and father figures can make to children's positive trajectory, and the authors espouse that the current study suggests that virtual PD sessions can help train school personnel to recognize and foster such relationships.

**Originality/value** – The past few decades have ushered in an awareness of significant male involvement and its importance in the development of young children. Despite this surge of interest, the research on father/significant male involvement in the school context remains limited. Additionally, the implementation of virtual PD and its potential positive impacts remain largely unexplored, especially when the intersection with father engagement practices is considered. As such, the authors espouse that the present study reflects a unique combination of content and pedagogy.

**Keywords** Father engagement, Male involvement, School–university partnerships, Disability

**Paper type** Practitioner paper

Administrators, teachers and other school-based personnel recognize the significance of parental involvement in schools; this is not a new concept. Likewise, many USA schools attempt to incorporate parent involvement opportunities into the school culture but with mixed success (Epstein, 2007). Although all Title I schools must address parental involvement in the framework of annual school improvement (SI/SIP) plans, the actualization of meaningful parental involvement remains a challenge (Stark, 2010). Further exacerbating the challenges of garnering parent involvement is the recent global pandemic (Carrión-Martínez, Pinel-Martínez, Pérez-Esteban, & Román-Sánchez, 2021). Yet perhaps one of the greatest challenges that remain is securing the involvement of one particular group of family members: fathers and father figures.

### Ever changing demographics

PK-12 students live in a world where family dynamics have shifted considerably over the past few decades; the traditional nuclear family is no longer the norm. Although mothers were primary points of contact for schools over a decade ago (Parker & Livingston, 2019), and despite the fact that households headed by single mothers still comprise roughly 23% of American households with children under the age of 18 (United States Census Bureau, 2017), households headed by single fathers are on the rise. In 2011, 8% of households in the United States were headed by single fathers (Livingston, 2013). By 2017, this number nearly doubled, rising to 16.1% (United States Census Bureau, 2017). The most recent census data indicates that 20% of single parent households are headed by single fathers (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Such statistics are indicative of a shift in demographics, which in turn suggests that fathers and father figures may need to be supported differently than they were decades ago.

### The importance of father involvement

In an attempt to honor and address all members of a child's family as significant figures, researchers, practitioners and politicians have turned their attention toward father involvement and its potential to positively influence the development of all children (Cabrera, 2020; Downer & Mendez, 2005; Flippin & Crais, 2011; McBride, Rane, & Bae, 2001; Fatherhood Research and Practice Network, 2020; Newland, Coy, & Freeman, 2008). Father

involvement makes a difference for all children. Research has shown that young children with highly involved fathers show heightened curiosity and better problem-solving skills (Pruett, 2009). Children with engaged fathers are more likely to be socially competent and consequently better able to establish healthy relationships with their peers (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, ACF, OHS, 2013).

Meaningful father engagement also has the capacity to significantly improve economic opportunity for both children and their fathers/father figures (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, ASPE, 2021). The focus on fathers and father figures is not suggested to undermine or minimize the impact of strong maternal attachments, nor is it mutually exclusive of maternal involvement in the schools. Rather, the shift in focus is grounded in a belief that fathers and father figures may be able to positively impact children in ways that remain largely unexplored.

### **Fathers of children with disabilities**

Despite the recent surge of interest in fathers, researchers have paid less attention to one group of fathers: fathers of children with disabilities (MacDonald & Hastings, 2010). Historically, most research on the family's coping and adjustment in such situations is often viewed through the lens of the mother (Beckman, 1991; Bourke-Taylor, Joyce, Grzegorzczyn, & Tirlea, 2022; Cabrera & Peters, 2000; Gothwal, Bharani, & Reddy, 2015). Seldom are fathers the respondents in studies on parental involvement (Hastings & Beck, 2004; Singer, Ethridge, & Aldana, 2007). More concerning is that in some of the extant parenting literature, "mother" is often generalized to "parent," and thus, father perspectives may be excluded altogether (Linder & Chitwood, 1984; McBride, Dyer, Liu, Brown, & Hong, 2009).

### **Impacts of school-based father involvement**

McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, and Ho (2005) found that father participation in school activities was positively associated with school achievement. When fathers are actively involved in their children's education, children perform better in school and are less likely to develop behavioral difficulties; this is true even when fathers do not share a home with their children (NRFCS, 2016). Fagan and Iglesias (1999) suggest that fathers' exposure to programs that encourage their involvement in schools may "...place expectations on fathers to strengthen their connections to their children" (p. 245). Thus, it is the responsibility of school systems to create these opportunities for fathers and disseminate information regarding these opportunities.

### **Barriers to father involvement**

Limited father involvement in schools is a systemic issue, and its cause is layered and nuanced. Several variables present as possible causes. Such variables include: maternal gatekeeping (Raikes & Belotti, 2007), work obligations including military deployment (Noggle, 2019), cultural and linguistic barriers (Lopez, 2001) and a general feeling of discomfort around school staff (Levine, 1993). Immigrant families with undocumented family members who fear deportation may be reluctant to become involved in school-based activities (McWayne, Campos, & Owsianik, 2008). Thus, it is critical to view parental (and paternal) involvement through the lens of the individualized culture of each family, noting that cultural beliefs surrounding familial involvement in the schools are often complex and nuanced (Prieto, Cabrera, Alonso, & Ghosh, 2022).

Moreover, fathers' apprehension about participating in school events may stem from the predominantly female staffing composition of early childhood and elementary classrooms

(McBride & Rane, 1997). Levine (1993) found that teachers were often ambivalent about fathers' classroom involvement. Over twenty years later, paternal participation in school programs was still quite variable and is much less pre-determined by societal expectations than that of maternal participation (Cabrera, Shannon, West, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006; McBride *et al.*, 2005). Though the data to support this notion seems dated, there exists little updated evidence to suggest otherwise.

Furthermore, we can hypothesize that implications of the pandemic created additional barriers and challenges, some of which have not yet been reflected in the research. Most studies on parental involvement during the pandemic, such as that by Bonilla, Camo, Lanzaderas, Lanzaderas, and Bonilla (2022) focus on the specific roles and level of involvement taken on by parents while children were engaged in online learning at home. While studies regarding engagement in home-based learning are certainly noteworthy, there clearly exists a dearth of research related to maintaining school-family relationships across the pandemic divide.

### **NAPDS Essentials**

The current investigation is supported by two of the NAPDS 9 Essentials. Our work exemplifies Essential # 1 as it “furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community.” Similarly, our sessions with teachers and paraeducators at our targeted PDS partner school connect to Essential #3, as these sessions reflect “ongoing and reciprocal PD for all participants guided by need.” With a specific focus on fathers and father figures at a Title I school, we seek to advance equity regarding the involvement of parental figures of all genders, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds through intentional professional development (PD) for teachers and support staff. The current study, implemented as part of our school–university partnership, comprises a small part of a larger, grant-funded initiative supported by the state school system.

### **PDS partnership**

In the spring of 2016, our special education department was able to secure several preservice candidate internships at a Title I elementary school in Howard County, MD. At that time, the current partner school was not part of any formal university partnership. Our specific preservice teacher program, which situates students for dual certification in Early Childhood and Special Education, was relatively new. By the spring of 2017, we worked with the local school system and our university PDS to solidify a formal partnership. We quickly established a PDS workgroup, which meets quarterly to ensure alignment of goals, priorities and resources. The first author served as the university partner PDS liaison for five years.

Early on, the school administration highlighted its mission to more meaningfully engage parents in the school community. During the school's prior principalship, the school improvement team had instituted some family engagement workshops, but those did not carry over into the new administration. In the course of developing the new PDS partnership, the first author mentioned her willingness to support the staff, both personally and through networking with other university faculty. The school stakeholders expressed interest in three topics: universal design for learning (UDL), behavior management and family involvement. In the course of subsequent conversation about the connectedness of family involvement and behavior strategies, one of the school-based partners surmised that children with more engaged fathers may be more emotionally regulated. At that time, the first author mentioned her work in the field of father involvement, which piqued the interest of the school's assistant principal.

In the spring of 2018, the first author piloted a small PD series to gauge staff interest in the topic of father involvement and to assess applicability of proactive father involvement practices within the framework of the PDS partner school. Sample commentary from pilot phase was favorable:

I enjoyed the PD with Dr. [first author]. I especially appreciated that we all got to work with each other interactively, thus giving us the opportunity to share our thoughts and perceptions of the sample dialogs. I look forward to learning more through similar type PD on family involvement.

The Title I liaison at the PDS partner school attended the pilot program and provided corroborating feedback:

Title I/ Our school is constantly reviewing our “family programs” for ways to include as many family members in our school community as possible. We have not targeted our fathers in a long time so this may have to be looked at closely. I have a meeting with our principal and AP later today about family programs for next year, so I will be bringing this topic to the forefront.

Simultaneously, the authors herein began crafting a grant-funded project in support of family engagement in the PDS partner school. The grant was funded for the 2018-2019 school year, again for the 2019-2020 school year and was then extended into 2021 due to the pandemic. As the grant’s focus aligns with mutually agreed upon goals as set forth by the PDS workgroup, we were able to garner support from our PDS school partner. Specifically, in a letter to the state education system, the school’s administrator stated:

Our [PDS partner] school is in enthusiastic support of [first author’s] application for funding for the professional development project related to fathers who are culturally and linguistically diverse and fathers whose children may have disabilities. Through this project, we will be able to further strengthen our relationship with [university partner] as we support staff in their efforts to support and meaningfully include fathers in school-based activities. [First author] presented an introductory session on this topic last June, and it was very well-received by our staff (Diaz, Letter to MSDE, 2018).

The initial phase of the project was successful in attracting approximately 20 teachers and paraeducators, who participated in quarterly PD sessions related to the importance of father engagement, a cognizance of the vast impacts of disability and an awareness of communication styles. As the project gained momentum, our university partner expressed interest in further solidifying PD opportunities. Specifically, in May of 2019, the school university partnership workgroup identified the following focus goal: *Incorporate expertise of university faculty for PD sessions related to family engagement and UDL*. (Clearly, the scope of the current project includes family engagement, as the UDL series was led separately by another faculty member). A second letter from the school administration highlighted the school’s desire to continue into year two of our collaborative efforts:

This project will afford our staff professional development opportunities related to the importance of father (and/or significant male) involvement in the schools, which they may not receive otherwise. The professional development sessions proposed by [author] will focus on the following: current parental involvement policies and the local, state and federal level; barriers that often inhibit father involvement, specific to fathers of children with disabilities and CLD fathers; strategies for overcoming those barriers; and components of successful father involvement programs from other schools and organizations around the country. If funded, [author] would be able to continue that work with us in a greater capacity (Albright, Letter to MSDE, 2019).

### **Maintaining relationships during the pandemic**

In March of 2020, school systems around the globe felt the deep impact of the pandemic with millions of prolonged school closures (Buonsenso *et al.*, 2021). Concerns about children’s well-

being, both academic and social; teachers' well-being and parental well-being have surfaced as highly critical issues. [Carrión-Martínez et al. \(2021\)](#) noted that while parental involvement within the school framework was indeed preferable prior to the pandemic, the logistics of remote schooling forced an obligatory type of involvement, one for which many families simply were not ready. "One of the most considerable challenges traditionally tackled by schools is the commitment to forging stronger bonds between the school and the families and between the students and families by opting for more significant family presence and involvement" ([Carrión-Martínez et al., 2021](#), p. 41).

Pandemic ramifications have undoubtedly affected the innerworkings of school–university partnerships, as well as school–family relationships. Throughout the pandemic, the current school–university partnership remained important in order to positively impact the "broader community" (NAPDS Essential #1). This broader community includes families and specific to the current study, fathers and father figures. Strong family–school partnerships encourage father involvement; as such, we decided to pursue our original project plan, with modifications, in light of the pandemic.

### Project plan and implementation

Nationally, within state and local school systems, comprehensive efforts are underway to increase the rate of parental involvement in school-based activities. Specifically, at our PDS partner school, teacher needs assessment data have consistently indicated a genuine interest in including fathers and father figures in meetings, classroom activities and other school-related events but feel they lack the specific knowledge to do so. Thus, the current project is rooted in the needs of students, family and staff at the PDS partner school.

Once the pilot phase was complete, the original operational project plan included a pre-assessment survey; face-to-face PD; a post-PD reflection survey; and a one-year follow-up post-PD survey. The pre-assessment survey was administered just before the universal school closure in March of 2020. All data was self-reported.

Four original research questions were posed:

- RQ1.* Do teachers believe that father involvement at home/at school makes a significant contribution to children's development?
- RQ2.* Do teachers believe that they have a constructive relationship with their families and the skills to build such relationships?
- RQ3.* What skills or tools do teachers need to better support and include fathers and father figures?
- RQ4.* What skills or tools do teachers need to better support and include fathers of children with disabilities? (If these are at all in fact different than #3).

Once data was gathered and synthesized, the original plan was to offer an in-person PD series anchored by the memoir of a father who raised a child with a disability; we planned to complement his story with data and vignettes related to the positive impacts of father involvement. Despite the inability to meet face-to-face, the PDS partners decided to proceed with a virtual PD series over the summer in an effort to support the PDS partner school throughout the challenges of the pandemic. Given the fact that the teachers spent the latter three months of their school year engaged in a "virtual relationship with families," we added a fifth research question to fit the situation at hand.

- RQ5.* What do teachers believe about the impacts of the pandemic on the relationships with their students' families?

**Methods**

*Setting*

During the initial phase of the study, schools were operating traditionally. However, as we moved into the planning stages of the PD component, local school systems were operating under strict pandemic guidelines; thus, the remote learning venue was the only option for this learning series. The PD series included staff from a public suburban elementary school in the mid-Atlantic region. The elementary school is a Title 1 school, currently ranked as the third lowest in the county (among elementary schools) based on Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) data. Specific details regarding participants, measures and procedures associated with the virtual PD sessions will be elaborated upon later in the sections that follow.

*Participants*

*School-based partners.* The school-based partner site employs approximately 61 instructional staff members, including 45.5 teachers and 15.5 paraeducators and support staff. Nine staff members participated in this PD. Roles of these participants include: assistant principal (1), school psychologist, (1) school-based family engagement liaison (1), classroom teacher (3) and paraeducator (3). [Table 1](#) captures attendance data for each PD session.

*Student population.* Although student outcomes were not the focus of the current study, we chose to include publicly available student demographic data in order to provide a richer picture of student and family characteristics. The overarching goal of the larger grant-funded initiative is to improve father and father figure engagement in schools, which in turn positively impacts children. The student population comprises approximately 400 students. The partner school is a highly diverse school with a majority of students (62%) receiving free and reduced price meals (FARMS), as well as significant numbers of minority students (86%), English Learners (21.4%) and students with documented disabilities (13.4%).

*Measures*

*Pre-professional development survey.* The university partner facilitators were interested in learning about teachers’ existing perceptions related to father-figure involvement, their perceived PD needs in this area, and their preferences for engaging in PD in order to guide the planning and implementation of the PD series. Participant input in the content and delivery of PD increases buy-in and the likelihood to impact practice ([Nagro, Hooks, & Fraser, 2020](#)). Initially, school administrators requested feedback from teachers regarding their interest in the content and their preferences for the format of PD sessions. The facilitators created a survey to measure teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of father-figure involvement, which was administered prior to the PD series.

Items were designed to measure teachers’ beliefs about the importance of father-figure involvement, as well as their perceived satisfaction with the level of father-figure involvement at their school. Items were also designed to measure differences between satisfaction with family involvement in general and involvement specific to father figures. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement by selecting whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each statement. See [Table 2](#) for closed ended Likert-scale survey items. In addition to the Likert-scale ratings, open-ended items were included to find

**Table 1.**  
Participant attendance  
in professional  
development sessions

Introduction	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4
11	9	9	7	8

**Source(s):** Table created by authors

**Table 2.** Participants' beliefs about family involvement and involving father figures

Survey item/Belief statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Overall, family involvement in my class last year was satisfactory	0 (0%)	7 (63.6%)	4 (36.4%)	0 (0%)
Overall, father-figure involvement last year was satisfactory	0 (0%)	4 (30.8%)	8 (61.5%)	1 (7.7%)
Overall, my working relationship with my students' families is constructive	3 (20%)	11 (73.3%)	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)
Overall, my working relationship with my students' father figures is constructive	1 (6.7%)	11 (73.3%)	3 (20%)	0 (0%)
Families' participation in activities at school fosters my students' academic development	9 (60%)	5 (33.3%)	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)
Father figure participation in activities at school fosters my students' academic development	8 (53.3%)	6 (40%)	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)
Families' participation in activities at home fosters my students' academic development	6 (40%)	7 (46.7%)	2 (13.3%)	0 (0%)
Father figure participation in activities at home fosters my students' academic development	7 (46.7%)	5 (33.3%)	3 (20%)	0 (0%)
Families' participation in activities at school fosters my students' social skills with peers	6 (40%)	7 (46.7%)	2 (13.3%)	0 (0%)
Father figure participation in activities at school fosters my students' social skills with peers	6 (40%)	6 (40%)	3 (20%)	0 (0%)
Families' participation in activities at home fosters my students' social skills with peers	7 (50%)	5 (35.7%)	2 (14.3%)	0 (0%)
Father figure participation in activities at home foster my students' social skills with peers	6 (42.9%)	5 (35.7%)	3 (21.4%)	0 (0%)
I think father-figure involvement in education promotes academic achievement	12 (80%)	3 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I think father-figure involvement in education promotes progress on IEP goals and objectives	11 (73.3%)	4 (26.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I have the knowledge and skills to meaningfully engage father-figures at my school and/or in my classroom	4 (26.7%)	8 (53.3%)	3 (20%)	0 (0%)

**Source(s):** Table created by authors

out how many PD sessions participants had attended, if any, that were specifically geared toward engaging father figures. This item was included because the facilitators conducted a series of PD sessions related to father-figure involvement at the partner school the previous year. Participants were asked to indicate how many individual communications they had with families per week and then how many were specifically with father figures. Lastly, open-ended items were designed to assess participants' interests and PD needs related to engaging father-figures.

*Post-professional development reflection survey.* A post-PD survey was created to be administered at the end of the last PD session. The purpose of this survey was to assess participants' perceived benefit from the PD content, intent to apply new knowledge and skills at their school and their satisfaction with the PD format. Table 3 includes specific survey items. Participants were asked to rate the relevance of the content of the PD series to their current or future role at their school on a scale of very relevant, mostly relevant, minimally relevant, or not relevant. They were asked to describe what they liked best about the content of the PD series and then what they liked best about the format of the series (see Table 4). Participants were also asked to reflect on their unique experiences with father-figures in their role as educators. Lastly, participants were asked what they would improve about the content of the PD series and then what they would improve about the format of the PD series.

*One-year follow-up survey.* A one-year follow-up survey was crafted to assess the PD's impact after one academic year. Table 5 includes specific survey items. At year one, participants were asked to rate their awareness of barriers and challenges related to the inclusion of fathers in school-based activities; their beliefs on the impact of the original PD series; their own ability to serve as a leaders in sharing knowledge and dispositions related to father engagement practices; and their desire to participate in future PD related to father engagement practices.

*Procedures*

*Professional development facilitation.* Over the summer of 2020, five PD sessions were conducted using a WebEx platform. Each session lasted 1.5 hours. The PD sessions were facilitated as a book club PD model. Book clubs have become a common form of PD in K-12 schools and has been shown to positively impact teacher practice, shift perceptions and strengthen connects with colleagues (Blanton, Broemmel, & Rigell, 2020). Furthermore, virtual book clubs among educators are also associated with positive impact on teachers' learning and collegiality (Porath, 2018).

Initially, the PD leaders provided an overview of family involvement policy frameworks, citing data on the impacts of significant male involvement and providing clinical definitions of certain disabilities as those topics arose in the focus book. As the course progressed into an application phase, PD leaders presented quotes from the book to spark conversation about applicable connections to the participants' lived experiences with families. Prior to the start of the PD session, participants in this partnership were provided with copies of the book, *One of Us*, by Mark Osteen (2010). The university partners selected this particular book because it was written from the perspective of a father of a child with a disability, specifically autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The personal narrative describes the family's experience raising their child from birth through adulthood. The author provides detailed accounts of his interactions with school staff and his journey of advocacy for his child.

Participants were instructed to read a particular segment of the book in preparation for each session and were encouraged not to read ahead of the group. The virtual PD (book study meetings) included PowerPoint presentations, active problem solving, group discussions and planning for future implementation of the strategies. Participants received electronic copies of PowerPoint presentations, which included discussion questions, prior to each PD session. The pre-survey was administered prior to discussion at the first virtual meeting. Discussions were designed to promote critical thinking related to father-figure involvement and enhance discussion during PD session. A comprehensive list and quotes, questions and prompts utilized are provided in Appendix. The first sample question is listed below:

Survey item	Very relevant	Mostly relevant	Minimally relevant	Not relevant
How relevant was this PD series to your current/future role at your school?	4 (57.1%)	2 (42.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

  

Survey item	Very likely	Likely	Somewhat likely	Unlikely
How likely will this PD series impact your work with fathers/father figures in your current/future role at your school?	5 (71.4%)	2 (28.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

**Table 3.** Post-survey of professional development relevance and potential impact

**Source(s):** Table created by authors

Survey item	Participant response
Please indicate what you liked best about the format of the PD series	<p>I loved the format of how everyone had the opportunity to express their views/insight, and how open we were in dissecting the information. Thank you to Amy and Sara for your great work</p> <p>The opportunity to share out and relate topics that occurred in book to my current work/life</p> <p>I enjoyed the open dialog. The questions were engaging and thought provoking</p> <p>It was nice to get the power point/questions early so that I could know what we were going to discuss. I like the format of reading and discussing different sections each week</p> <p>I liked how the flow of it was like an actual book club where different views were brought together</p> <p>It was great discussing with colleagues and listening to their different point of view</p> <p>I like the interactive open-ended questions and thoughtful conversations</p> <p>I loved the clarity and the slides presented at each session. Also, the questions to ponder for the upcoming session I appreciated that it was relatable to my profession</p> <p>I think the choice of text was very relevant. Hearing the perspective of a father of a child with special needs is pretty rare</p> <p>It was interesting to read the perspective of the parents of a student with autism. It was good to see what the other side of the IEP meetings and conversations looked like. I will be more mindful to make sure that I explain things to families and take the time to listen to their questions and concerns</p> <p>Definitely, yes</p> <p>Yes, all fathers need and should have access to information/resources that will empower/help them and their families</p> <p>Yes, it has. Families of children with disabilities need support not pity. They are doing the best they can to function as "normal" as possible. Fathers of special needs children in particular need patience, grace, and guidance. Many can't handle it and may leave the family. Some may stay but still aren't present in their child's day to day routine. Finally, you have those who are "all in" no matter what the circumstance</p> <p>This book has opened my eyes to what happens in families with disabilities beyond the school hours. I have already started to address communications to families (instead of one parent or the other) and send feedback to both parents if I have their email address. When we are finally back in person, I am hoping to have more fathers join us in the classroom when volunteers are allowed - not sure how to work that into virtual instruction at the moment, but if I can, I will</p> <p>Yes, it was a very informative book and helped me see how fathers are just as important as mothers in a child's education</p> <p>I am not sure how it has impacted my view. I think when the school begins and I meet with families, I will mentally reference this book and our discussions. It will be interesting to see how it drives some of my decision making and communication with families</p> <p>I think that it refreshes my mind about our families and their family dynamics and how best to support families and our wonderful students!</p>
Please indicate if and how this professional development series impacted your view of families of children with disabilities, particularly fathers/father figures	<p>(continued)</p>

**Table 4.** Post-survey open-ended responses for participants' satisfaction with PD series

Table 4.

Survey item	Participant response
Based on the content of the PD and your experiences as an educator, briefly reflect on the unique experiences of fathers both in and out of the school environment	<p>Culturally, this is an eye-opener in so many ways when working and presenting information to some of the fathers that we work with</p> <p>Many fathers may struggle in silence and mask what they have been through and place blame on their children. Depending on the father's SES, they may not have the resources they need in order to properly care for themselves and/or their families. Many fathers want to be involved in their child's life more, but factors like work and relationship with their mother may impact that</p> <p>Fathers are beginning to realize that they play a significant role in their child's education. It used to be the mom going to parent conferences, communicating with the teacher, and visiting the classrooms. This is now shifting where fathers are more actively involved with their child at school when their schedules allow them to do so (e.g. attending classroom/school events and field trips)</p> <p>I think that fathers can bring a lot to the classroom, especially in early childhood and primary grades where we don't have many male figures in the classroom. In my 10 years in kindergarten, I have been lucky to have 4 wonderful male volunteers that came to support the students in my classroom in different years. We also had a lot of tech support during Google meets from parents that had technology experiences. We just have to remember to be open and inclusive</p> <p>Fathers are key in their child's education. I don't think some fathers realize how important it is for them to attend PTA meetings or PT conferences. They are important in that their child sees that their dad is interested in their well-being and it does not have to do with sports but how the child is doing in the classroom</p> <p>Fathers bring a unique perspective to the school environment. Often they are more open and honest than mothers when discussing the needs of students and the impact on the family. It is often difficult to get them into the school building but once they are there, there insight is often invaluable</p> <p>Fathers have just as much and sometimes more to contribute as mothers do. Often, we see the mother as being more involved. However, through this book we get a father's perspective on his experience with his son</p>

Source(s): Table created by authors

**Table 5.** One-year follow-up on participants' beliefs about impact of professional development

Survey item/Belief statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I believe that the content and discussion of the professional development series (book club summer 2020) has influenced my work with father-figures during this school year	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I have a greater awareness of challenges and barriers to father-figure involvement since attending the summer 2020 PD series	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I am interested in participating in more PD on engaging father figures	0 (0%)	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I believe that I can take on a leadership role to share my knowledge and practices engaging father-figures with my colleagues	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

**Source(s):** Table created by authors

Discuss your inferred opinions regarding the communication style that Mr. Osteen had with professionals who worked with his son and/or those who encountered the family in the community. Do you think there were any opportunities for improved communication from either the parent, professional, or a stranger? If so, can you share an example or two?

Conceptual questions posed included: “What have you learned so far that helps frame the historical perspective regarding autism and how we have come to understand it?” and “Have we made ‘progress’ in diagnosing and treating ASD since this book was written?” Questions specific to the book content included: “Do you believe that school staff perceived Mr. Osteen as an ‘expert’ on his son’s strengths and abilities?” and “What quotes or inferences support your opinion?”

The post-PD survey was distributed through email immediately following the summer PD via Survey Monkey. Two weeks later, we sent a follow-up email to encourage survey completion. At that time, we also let the participants know that our intent was to follow up in one year to see if the themes of the PD and skills acquired were transferable and relatable in their everyday work with families.

## Results

Table 1 shows the number of attendees at each PD session, including the initial informational session. Eleven participants attended the initial informational session. Nine participants attended session one, nine attended session two, seven attended session three and eight attended the last session in addition to the two university partners. Although, on average nine participants attended the virtual sessions, only five to seven submitted written responses to weekly discussion questions (see Appendix). In addition, anecdotal notes recorded by university partners during PD sessions indicated high levels of participation and engagement during each session from the same five participants who submitted. Participation was variable for the other participants, meaning that they attended but did not contribute substantially to the discussion.

### *Pre-professional development survey*

The pre-PD survey was administered via Survey Monkey in the spring prior to the summer PD series to measure participants’ perceptions of family and father-figure involvement in their school and classrooms during the most recent school year. Table 2 displays survey items and participant responses. Eleven participants responded to the pre-PD survey. The

first two items of the pre-survey were designed to establish the need for the PD series by asking participants to rate their satisfaction with family engagement and specifically father-figure engagement at their school. Sixty-four percent of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the level of family engagement and 36% indicated they disagree. Regarding involvement specific to father-figure involvement, 31% indicated they agreed that father-figure involvement was satisfactory, 62% disagreed and 7% strongly disagreed. All participants strongly agreed or agreed that their working relationships with their families were constructive and all respondents agreed that their working relationships with father-figures were constructive. All participants agreed or strongly agreed that family and father-figure participation at school fosters students' academic achievement.

All respondents, except for one who disagreed, agreed or strongly agreed that family and father-figure involvement at home fosters students' academic achievement. Two respondents disagreed that father-figure involvement in activities at home fosters students' academic achievement. Similarly, most participants agreed or strongly agreed that family involvement fosters social/emotional development, with the exception of two respondents who disagreed that father-figure involvement at home fosters social/emotional development.

#### *Post-professional development survey*

The post-PD survey was administered via Survey Monkey at the end of the last PD session to measure participants' perceived benefit from the content and format of the PD series. [Table 3](#) displays survey items and results for ratings of perceived relevance and potential impact of the PD series. Seven participants responded to the post-survey. All respondents indicated that the PD series was very relevant or mostly relevant to their professional role at their school. All respondents indicated that the PD series would very likely or likely impact their work with families at their school.

To gain insight on how the PD series may impact participants' perceptions of families, specifically father-figures, they were asked to describe if and how the PD series impacted their view of families of children with disabilities, specifically father-figures. [Table 4](#) shows open-ended responses. All except one participant suggested that the book generated greater awareness of the unique experiences had by families and father-figures with a child with a disability. One participant suggested that "Fathers of children with special needs in particular need patience, grace and guidance." Another participant stated: "I think that fathers can bring a lot to the classroom, especially in early childhood and primary grades where we don't have many male figures in the classroom." Perhaps one of the most poignant statements pulled from the anecdotal feedback is "Families of children with disabilities need support – not pity." Finally, another participant commented: "This book opened my eyes to what happens in families with disabilities beyond school hours."

#### *One-year follow up survey*

Three respondents participated in the one-year follow-up survey, which was administered in the spring of 2021. Notably, our PDS partner school system was largely virtual until the fall of 2022; as such, principles of father engagement were applied during virtual work with families. As [Table 5](#) shows, all participants either strongly agreed or agreed that the content and discussion of the PD series (book club summer 2020) influenced their work with father-figures during the school year. Similarly, all respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that they had gained a greater awareness of challenges and barriers to father-figure involvement since attending the summer 2020 PD series. All three respondents agreed that they would like to partake in future workshops related to father engagement. Finally, all participants either strongly agreed or agreed that they would be comfortable taking on a leadership role among school peers to disseminate new learnings related to father

engagement. Table 5 will also show Likert-type responses only, as none of the three respondents provided anecdotal feedback.

#### *Views on pandemic impact on relationships*

In regard to the fifth research question, several responses are noteworthy. When asked: “How has the pandemic influenced your work with families, in general, over the last year?” responses included: “I have loved the chance to get to see families in their home environments and I felt privileged that they were comfortable enough to share their homes with me and the other students,” and “Although I got to see them more, it was still difficult to communicate with some families - I did not always have time between student groups to meet with families and I Google met (sic) or phone called parents outside of my contracted hours in the workday.” When asked: “How has the pandemic influenced your work with father-figures, specifically, over the last year?” responses included: “I was able to see more fathers this year because they were also working from home or covering some of the class time to help their child early in the school year” and “I did miss having classroom volunteers and field trips as that is always a time when I see fathers during a non-pandemic year.”

When asked to “Describe if and how the professional development series during summer 2020 impacted your work with father-figures during this school year,” responses included: “I think that knowing some of the barriers for fathers being involved was important” and “I made sure to send emails about a child (congratulations or notes of concern) to both parents, unless I had been specifically contacted by one parent. I did hear replies from more fathers/male figures than in a normal year.” Finally, when asked “What additional content or supports would be helpful to promote father-figure engagement at your school?” responses included: “I think having another event like we did two years ago would be helpful” and “Maybe asking those dads what would benefit them the most in so that their kiddo could be successful.”

## **Discussion**

### *Implications for practice*

Results of the current study inform practice in a number of ways. First, results seem to indicate teachers’ willingness to reflect on their current beliefs and practices related to including fathers and father figures in the classroom. This willingness may lend itself to future PD sessions for broader audiences and possibly multiple PDS sites within the district. Second, results seem to support that the PD facilitated capacity building in terms of teachers’ ability to see fathers and father figures as meaningful contributors within the context of the school environment. Finally, the current study offers a small glimpse into the world of a school–university partnership and its ability to maintain connections through virtual and distance formats. Although schools and school systems across the country have returned to predominantly in-person instruction, we espouse that the pandemic certainly taught us that we have the ability to meaningfully connect virtually. While we are not refuting the necessity and value of face-to-face PD, the current study highlights the feasibility and sustainability of a virtual PD model as a flexible option for school–university partnerships.

Results also indicate a greater awareness of significant male figures/fathers and their needs. Participants mentioned that the PD taught them to recognize and remediate some of the insidious communication barriers that exist. Participants stated that they grew in their understanding of intentional connections with significant male figures, noting concerted effort to ensure communication of information pertaining to school events, conferences and in some cases individualized educational programs (IEPs). One participant noted that they would more meaningfully plan for father volunteers in the classroom in the future, and another noted that they had already begun to shift their communicative attempts to include

all members of the family listed as the student' parents or guardians unless indicated otherwise. Such practices can likely be implemented and replicated at numerous PDS partner schools within the district.

### *Limitations*

Despite the positive impacts noted above, the current study is not without its limitations. First, the sample size of the present study was small, and participation was variable across PD sessions. In addition, participants self-selected into the series, and therefore, they may be more likely to value father-figure involvement with or without participation in the PD series. The small sample size may minimize the generalizability of these results across other replicable settings and participants.

Second, results of the pre-PD survey could be positively skewed since the University partner's initial delivery of PD related to this topic began in 2018. In the pre-PD survey, the majority of respondents indicated, as an example, that they believed father involvement was correlated with higher academic achievement. It is not clear if respondents held these beliefs independently at the inception of the partnership, or if they perhaps learned of these connections during an earlier PD offered by the authors.

Earlier results indicated that staff members also felt as though the pandemic fostered greater connections with fathers who were working at home and who were simultaneously helping their children access online learning platforms. However, it is noteworthy that the latter benefit was likely a positive side effect of mandatory home-based learning as opposed to a direct result of the present study.

Finally, a fairly significant limitation is rooted in the results of the one-year follow-up survey. The original timeline included: pre-PD survey administration, PD reflection survey, in vivo application of principles gleaned from the five PD sessions, and subsequently, a one-year follow up application survey. Notably, our PDS partner school system was mostly virtual until the fall of 2022. Moreover, the school year on which the pre-PD survey data was based upon could not be replicated since study participants worked in a traditional classroom setting for approximately six months and then taught online for roughly three months. The school year on which the one-year follow-up survey was based upon included seven months of purely virtual learning followed by two months of optional in-person learning for students whose parents opted in. As such, the two academic years are not comparable. Outside of these incongruent survey implementation settings, the extremely low response rate alone severely minimizes the ability to draw meaningful conclusions about this work beyond the scope of immediate impact.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the limitations noted above, the present study provides an asset-based lens through which we may view teachers' willingness to include fathers of children with disabilities in program planning and school activities. It is not surprising, given the longstanding focus of mothers and maternal involvement in education, that few researchers have focused on teachers' willingness to reflect upon and implement father-friendly practices. Society seems to acknowledge that father involvement matters for children, but schools, with the feasible support from university partners, should take concerted steps to meaningfully craft involvement opportunities that embrace fathers and father figures from all walks of life, including but certainly not limited to: those who may come from low-income backgrounds, are culturally and linguistically diverse and/or may have a child with a disability. Through mutually respectful and reciprocal school-university partnerships, we can continue to foster conversations, activities and PD sessions that embrace all fathers and father figures and that honor the richness of their contributions to the classroom.

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	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Week 1	<p>“...we do not, and cannot present the narratives of low-income fathers [from the 1950’s and 1960’s – what some conceive as the golden age of family life.” What is meant by the term “golden age of family life”? Do you believe that people from all races/cultures would view the 50’s and 60’s as the golden age? (p. 17)</p>	<p>Compare and contrast two men portrayed thus far (Amin, Tim, John, Byron, Andre, Terrell, etc.). List at least one similarity and one difference. Why did you choose your particular duo?</p>	<p>At the beginning of the book, the authors refer to Bill Cosby and his condemnation of men who leave their children. (The inclusion and glorification of Cosby likely gave us all pause – I had to look again and see when the book was written). Are there any other historical references – either to people or events – that didn’t sit well with you or indicate that this book is 8 years old?</p>	<p>On p. 67, the authors refer to the “rhetorical contrast of guns vs babies.” In your opinion, what is meant by this? Are there any other contrasts such as this one thus far in the book (either literal or inferred on your part)?</p>
Week 2	<p>Choose one quote from this week’s reading that you found particularly poignant and inspirational? (Please provide p. # and give a brief overview of why this quote struck you)</p>	<p>“Thus, people need a strong reason - a stake in conformity - to abide by society’s rules” (p. 89). Do you believe that it’s only conformity which encourages us to follow societal rules?</p>	<p>Hirschi (p. 89 again) references “keys” to refraining from deviant activity. What are these keys?</p>	<p>In these chapters (esp. “Ward Clever”), we see several references to the “doing the best I can” mantra. How do the authors suggest this is a cop-out? Do you agree?</p>
Week 3	<p>P. 137 “Lynn. . .in this role is hampered by too much clean living.” What does Ernest mean by this? Do you agree?</p>	<p>In Ch. 5, the authors allude to the fact that some fathers are preoccupied and over-focused on financial provision for their children. Why is this potentially a bad thing?</p>	<p>How does Erikson’s stage of “generativity vs stagnation” come into play in Chapter 5?</p>	<p>In Chapter 6, Holloway states that when one does not have custody of one’s children, the children do not respect the non-custodial parent. How did this statement sit with you? (p. 164)</p>
Week 4	<p>P. 181: Consider Ray’s situation with Regina and David. What barrier (from our initial evening together when we discussed barriers) presents itself in this case? You may need to revisit our original power point slides. . .</p>	<p>Consider any of the barriers that we discussed on night one. Have you thought of any ways to break down these barriers in your classrooms (or in your contact with parents if you don’t have a literal classroom?)</p>	<p>P. 186: “Marty is one of many Dads who swore he wouldn’t be like his own absent Dad, yet has still managed to replicate his own Dad’s behavior.” To what kind of behavior does this quote refer? Do you see a pattern in the book as it relates to this quote?</p>	<p>Look at Tables 1–7 (Note that tables start on p. 232). List at least one stat that surprises you and tell us why you are surprised</p>

Source(s): Appendix created by authors

**Table A1.**  
Book study guiding questions