



## Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth

ISSN: 1045-988X (Print) 1940-4387 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vpsf20>

---

# Parent University in alternative schools: Asset-based programming for parents of formerly-incarcerated youth

Jen Stacy, Linda Gutierrez & Danita McMillian

To cite this article: Jen Stacy, Linda Gutierrez & Danita McMillian (2018): Parent University in alternative schools: Asset-based programming for parents of formerly-incarcerated youth, Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, DOI: [10.1080/1045988X.2018.1523127](https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2018.1523127)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2018.1523127>



Published online: 20 Dec 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

---



## Parent University in alternative schools: Asset-based programming for parents of formerly-incarcerated youth

Jen Stacy, Linda Gutierrez, and Danita McMillian

California State University–Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA, USA

### ABSTRACT

Familial engagement is a cornerstone in comprehensive alternative education; however, implementing high-quality parental outreach is difficult. Traditional approaches to parent outreach view diverse families from a deficit perspective and seek to change their behaviors, instead of building on their funds of knowledge. This article presents a case study about Parent University, a program designed with an additive lens to inform parents of formerly incarcerated youth about the college-going process. Findings showcase the framework of the program and analyze the experiences of participants. Approaching families through an additive perspective is key in developing mutually beneficial relationships amongst stakeholders. This study demonstrates how familial outreach initiatives can begin to include space for parents' voices and draw from this to create more responsive curriculum and learning experiences.

### KEYWORDS

Alternative education;  
family outreach; formerly  
incarcerated youth

Alternative settings provide opportunities for youth to fulfill their secondary-education requirements while attending to their unique needs. In California, alternative schools are overseen by county offices of education. They exist as stand-alone secondary schools, components of juvenile detention centers, or within juvenile camps. It is often the case that students come to alternative classrooms facing social, emotional, and academic challenges, amongst others, in traditional school settings. Students in alternative schools navigate unique realities compared to their traditional public-school peers; some are serving time in juvenile detention, some are transitioning back to mainstream school from a detention center, and some have been expelled from their community school for various reasons. Helping students with social and emotional issues while supporting them academically is a responsibility for stakeholders in alternative schools. These students represent some of the country's most marginalized populations regarding socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and language and print literacy skills (NDTAC, 2015; Staples-Farmer, 2014). So do their parents.

Research has shown that the relationship between families and schools is a cornerstone to a comprehensive approach to working with youth in alternative settings (Larocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011; NDTAC, 2015). However, familial outreach efforts by schools largely invoke a deficit lens toward families—particularly parents of color who are learning English and receive a low income—viewing them as “problems” that need to be “fixed” (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013). When familial outreach takes on an asset-based approach, viewing parents as beings with deep funds of knowledge who co-collaborate in

program and curriculum design, participants are more invested in learning and more empowered by the outreach initiatives (Mandel, Mandelson & Kuhn, 2010; Millikin-Lynch, 2009; Turner & Edwards, 2009). While asset-based familial outreach programs exist and are highly esteemed, they are still few in number in PreK–12 schooling at large.

Alternative schools face many challenges in implementing high-quality, asset-based parent outreach programs. Parents are often preoccupied with the academic, social, and emotional challenges their child is facing. Educational choices have been limited; parents have little to no say regarding their child's school placement and may need to commute across the city or county. Some parents are issued a court order to attend parenting classes. These factors, coupled with economic status, language(s) spoken, immigration status, and institutional perspectives intersect and influence parents' interaction with their child's schooling.

This article presents a case study of one family outreach initiative at an alternative school in a large metropolitan county district in southern California that served formerly incarcerated youth. Leaders of the district's Parent Education Consultation Program (PECP) attempted to implement an asset-based approach to inform parents about the college-going process through a program called Parent University. This case study of Parent University describes the process of designing and implementing the program through an additive lens and analyzes participants' experiences within the program. Findings suggests that, while the program enacted a responsive approach to curriculum development, there remain opportunities for improvement to be more reflective of families' cultural realities. As the field of

alternative education moves forward with holistic educative initiatives, approaching families through an additive perspective will be key in developing fruitful and beneficial relationships amongst all stakeholders.

## Review of the literature

### *The need for asset-based familial outreach*

Parent-school relationships within alternative schools reflect the larger trend of how families are generally perceived by institutions of education. By the end of the twentieth century, a strand of research had been established connecting children's home environment and school performance (Sidle Fuligni & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). Educators have long looked to parents to "partner" in children's learning and have implemented outreach programs to foster these relationships. Learning about the home environment has become accepted as a way to better understand students' needs and to gain insights from families to better support students. Within this approach, however, families have also been viewed as a site for intervention; if a family's home practices do not match those of school, an interventionist perspective proposes that these practices could be altered to better reflect the school's expectations through programming (Alamprese, 2004; Jacobs, 2004). As a result, many outreach programs target specific skills that schools feel families either do not possess or that they need to improve, such as standard English language skills, reading, and writing, which mostly align with White, middle-class norms (Auerbach, 1995; 2009; Heath, 1983).

Families whose home practices perceivably do not match these skills have long been targeted for intervention, particularly families who receive a low income, are of minoritized backgrounds, and are learning English (Valdés, 1996). Parents of formerly incarcerated youth reflect these demographics (NDTAC, 2015) and receive messages from multiple social institutions (e.g., the juvenile justice system and the school) that their home practices must be altered for their child's well-being. While most programming is well-intended and couched under the guise of promoting students' academic success, it has typically viewed its participants through a deficit lens (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013). The discourse around "parent involvement" points to how schools generally view middle-class parents as resources, sometimes overflowing with ways to support children, while families who receive low incomes and are labeled as ethnically "diverse" (i.e., families of color) are viewed as empty vessels in need of direction regarding how to support their children (Lightfoot, 2004). The latter parents are recruited for in-school parent training programs that "are predicated on the idea that someone other than the parents, generally professors of education or employees of grant-funded agencies, know better than the parents themselves how to raise and educate children" (Lightfoot, 2004, p. 100). In alternative schools, parents may receive this message from both the school and the court system; California courts commonly mandate parenting classes for guardians of adjudicated youth (California Courts, 2018).

A deficit approach to familial outreach perpetuates misunderstandings about families and what it means to be an "involved" parent (Valdés, 1996). Such programs promote the ideology that parents, particularly those of minoritized backgrounds, are not doing the "right" thing for their children and should change their practices. In reality, parents are drawing from their cultural practices to make the best decisions for their families given their realities. Valdés's (1996) ethnographic study of Mexican-origin families illuminated the strategies that families use to navigate U.S. social institutions that differ from what the school expected, such as drawing from shared family knowledges and *consejos* (advice). More recent ethnographic research showed how some parents may resist deficit ideology during programming, some may internalize it, and others may stop attending the program or never attend at all (Stacy, 2017). Data collected about the long-term effects of intervention programs show that parents generally are satisfied with the services, but that their participation has minimal effect on the targeted skills (Von Steensel, Herppich, McElvany, & Kurvers, 2012; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2012). Research about familial outreach programs has illustrated that these programs largely meet the school's goals as opposed to the participants' and may contribute to further marginalization of certain populations (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; 1996; Stacy, 2017).

Shifting away from a deficit approach toward an asset approach to familial outreach must be intentional. Several studies of grassroots family initiatives have been successfully developed and implemented by parents or in partnership with parents. In these programs, families' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), or specific cultural ways of knowing, are at the heart of the program and parents are active decision makers regarding curriculum and activities. These programs also work to organize meaningful support systems for families that are reflective of their needs, their communities and their cultural practices (Harbin, Herrmann, Wasik, Dobbins, & Lam, 2004; Naon, Van Dyke, Fixsen, Blasé, & Villagomez, 2012). Several programs have been implemented by and with Latinx families and have permitted parents to take on leadership roles, to bring cultural aspects to the center of learning, and to define notions of parenting, support, and other topics in their own terms (Galindo & Medina, 2009; Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004; Johnson, 2009; Mandel et al., 2010; Reyes & Torres, 2007). Studies have shown that these programs are successful in empowering parents (Mandel et al., 2010; Orellana, 1996), yet continue to be exceptions in all schools (Anderson, Smythe, & Shapiro, 2005; Millikin-Lynch, 2009; Phillips & Sample, 2005; Rogers & Schofield, 2005; Turner & Edwards, 2009).

### *Familial outreach in alternative schools*

As mentioned, parents of formerly incarcerated youth whose children attend alternative schools commonly possess the characteristics of parents who are targeted by interventionist models of parent outreach; they are of minoritized

backgrounds, receive a low income, and may speak languages other than English in the home (NDTAC, 2015; Staples Farmer, 2014). Still, family involvement is considered foundational for holistically supporting youth as they navigate alternative education (NDTAC, 2015). Newton, Thompson, Oh, and Ferullo (2017) demonstrated how a multifaceted, full-service approach to alternative education that interconnected students, parents, teachers, staff, and community members/services fostered social capital. These authors argue that an additive approach to alternative education effects positive change for students and their families in their communities and postsecondary lives. Larocque et al. (2011) suggest that an equitable approach to working with diverse parents in these settings is essential: “Parents base their participation on a variety of factors such as comfort level, knowledge, self-confidence, motivation, and language skills. Teachers should strive to make involvement familiar and more meaningful for parents” (p. 121). Scholars agree that drawing from families’ cultural experience is vital when designing and implementing parental outreach in alternative settings.

A scan of the literature illustrates that little is known regarding best practices for working with our focus population, parents of formerly incarcerated youth. Research in the field of family outreach programs, such as family literacy, has looked at parents (both adult and juvenile) who are incarcerated and has studied how they interacted with their children (Muth, 2011). Our scan of the literature found no specific study about school support for parents of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated youth. In order to develop meaningful and responsive initiatives for this parent population, educators must first learn about parents’ perspectives, goals, and ambitions and consider how well the school’s outreach initiatives align with these realities. This information can then be used to form culturally responsive programming as opposed to an interventionist or deficit model (Auerbach, 1995). What follows is a case study of a family engagement program that attempted to develop curriculum through an additive lens by drawing on the thoughts, ideas, and concerns of parents/guardians of formerly incarcerated youth. Its significance is that it begins to address the gap in the literature regarding this unique population and can serve as a framework for alternative educators seeking to develop more relevant familial outreach.

### **Integrating an asset-based approach: The case of Parent University**

The Urbium County Education (UCE; pseudonym) school district is a large, urban school district that oversees more than twenty alternative education programs. It serves students from various school districts who have been expelled from their neighborhood school, who are incarcerated, or who are transitioning out of juvenile detention. (It is worth noting that UCE also oversees specialized high schools and Head Start programs with different student populations.) This case study focuses on families from one alternative school, Transformation County School (pseudonym), which

serves students in Grades 7–12, all of whom, at the time of this study, were transitioning out of juvenile detention centers. The number of students at Transformation County School varies throughout any school year due to this transition. However, the demographics of these students largely remain the same. The majority of students are Latinx (75%) and African American (22%) and a small proportion identify as White, Filipino, and Asian (Ed-Data, 2017). At the time of this study, 99% of students qualified for free or reduced-cost meals and about a quarter were labeled English language learners (Ed-Data, 2017). None of the students met the requirements to enter a four-year university during the 2016–2017 school year (Ed-Data, 2017).

During fall 2016, the UCE parent education specialist, who oversaw the entire district, expressed an interest in developing a pilot program that would inform parents of formerly incarcerated youth about the college-going process. There was a consensus amongst administrators that UCE students and their families were not typically targeted as “college-going” and were not likely to consider any form of postsecondary education as an option after high school. Many students had imminent needs, such as serving time in juvenile detention or being on parole, that overshadowed notions of life after high school and influenced perspectives of the feasibility of college. Furthermore, general college-outreach initiatives were more aligned to traditional high school students who have had different social and educational experiences than their UCE counterparts and who meet the academic requirements for attending a four-year university. In order to provide UCE students and their families an equitable opportunity to learn about postsecondary education options, the parent education specialist wanted to implement a pilot version of the Parent University program in spring 2018 at Transformation County School. The goal of Parent University was to inform parents of formerly incarcerated youth about the college-going process so that they would be knowledgeable about pursuing postsecondary education. The pilot would be guided by an additive ideology that centered on families’ unique needs and educational situations—the program design and curriculum would undergo careful scrutiny to become responsive to families’ realities. It was hoped that the pilot would become a model for all future UCE familial outreach programming and would support the district in invoking an additive lens at large.

### **Case-study design**

Research was a central piece to the design and implementation of Parent University. Jen Stacy, an assistant professor at a local university, was recruited by the UCE administrative team as a consultant to design the program through an additive lens. Linda Gutierrez and Danita McMillian, along with other undergraduate students, were recruited as a part of the research team to collect data about the program throughout implementation. The student assistants were first-generation college students and spoke Spanish; one had attended a UCE alternative high school and provided

important insight to working with participants. The research team collected ongoing data to provide guidance for adapting the Parent University curriculum to meet parents' needs and interests.

After reviewing the literature on family-school relations with the administrators, Stacy suggested using open-ended interviews with parents/guardians throughout the program as a way to authentically involve the participants as co-constructors of the curriculum. Data were collected through these interviews, observations of each session, and a final survey in efforts to address the following questions: How can an asset-based approach to parent outreach be applied in an alternative school setting? And, what are the experiences of parents of formerly incarcerated youth as they participate in Parent University? Participants in the pilot of Parent University included a total of nine parents/guardians of formerly incarcerated youth (six mothers, two fathers, and one grandmother). In line with Transformation County School demographics, seven of the participants identified as Latinx while the other two were African American. Six of the parents/guardians had completed high school, while three completed some high school; none of the participants attended college. Families commuted from various parts of the city to the school.

To capture a robust case study (Stake, 1995) of participants' experiences in Parent University, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected throughout the pilot. The authors attended each session, conducted observations, wrote detailed field notes, and collected relevant artifacts such as handouts and presentation slides. Parents/guardians participated in a debriefing session after each Parent University meeting where they responded to open-ended interview questions. Interviews were conducted bilingually, in Spanish and English, depending on the participants' preferences; two mothers selected Spanish while the others spoke in English. Interviews were transcribed and, along with observations, analyzed thematically using open and focused coding (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011).

The qualitative data informed responsive, weekly curriculum development; learning experiences, suggestions, and concerns of the participants were closely consulted after each session to develop the curriculum for the following week. The approach taken to explore a given topic stemmed directly from the participants' input during the debriefing session. In addition, a final survey, available in both Spanish and English, was given to parents to quantify their learning experiences. The survey collected demographic data about the participants, asked about satisfaction with the program, collected feedback about the quality and relevance of each session, and asked parents for input regarding future programs. Given the small number of participants in the program ( $N = 9$ ), the survey was analyzed through descriptive statistics. The qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately and then compared to illustrate the participants' learning experiences. Findings were analyzed through Auerbach's (1995; 2009) additive lens to understanding families when implementing programs in educational settings.

## Findings

### *The design of parent university program*

Parent University was a collaboration amongst several entities. The UCE administrative team consisted of the district's parent education specialist, the Title One project director, and the principal and vice principal of Transformation County School. A partnership was also formed with representatives from a local community college, who led each session. The community college had an existing curriculum for Parent University programs and agreed to work closely with UCE to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of UCE's families. (The community college was selected precisely because the focus-students did not need to meet the academic requirements for acceptance to four-year universities.) Last, Stacy was brought in as a consultant and a researcher for ideological and conceptual insight.

The planning and implementation of Parent University closely followed an asset-based familial outreach design (Auerbach, 1995) in the sense that all stakeholders valued families' unique characteristics, including the realities of the focus-child (who had been incarcerated), and worked to integrate their interests and needs into the program. We wanted families to feel welcome and comfortable talking about their situations so that they could begin to see how college could fit into their lives. While entire families were invited to attend Parent University, our research focused only on the experiences of parent/guardians. For this reason, our findings reference parents/guardians as opposed to families. During each session of Parent University, the parents/guardians attended a workshop given by the community college. The workshops were generally open ended presentations and the presenters welcomed questions and encouraged conversations. After the presentation, the parents debriefed with the research team. Stacy asked open ended questions about the parents' experience during the workshop, their understanding of the material, and what they wanted to learn about next, with special attention to their focus-child. This information was then coded and used to plan the next session. The curriculum of Parent University was generated by and for the parents, a beginning approach to responsive curriculum. Using this method, the following themes were explored during Parent University:

- Session 1: Overview of Community College
- Session 2: Financial Aid
- Session 3: Financial Aid and Areas of Study
- Session 4: Student Support Groups and Motivation
- Session 5: Celebration and Tour of the Community College

### *Participants' experiences*

Looking deeply at participants' experiences during Parent University was essential to understanding the responsiveness of the program to families' interests and needs and if it was successful in addressing formerly incarcerated youth's unique realities. The findings are presented by the themes

that emerged from observation, interview, and survey data. Three major themes emerged: college as a real possibility for UCE students, support for children, and abjection of the focus-child's realities. The presentation of these findings illustrates the strengths of the program as well as opportunities for improvement.

### *College as a real possibility*

A theme that surfaced during each debriefing session of Parent University was that parents/guardians now saw higher education as a real possibility for their children and even for themselves. Particularly, participants stated that the application process for community college was easier than they expected, especially regarding admissions and financial aid. The community college presenters attempted to make the material relatable to parents of formerly incarcerated youth by incorporating presenters who had attended UCE alternative schools and/or had been incarcerated. They explained that the community college accepts everyone, regardless of academic or criminal past, and that the college has services to help folks navigate employment, even with a criminal record. Parents/guardians noted that this was relatable and eye-opening; if these presenters could go to college, so could their children. The fact that a juvenile record did not disqualify the focus-children to enroll in community college was new and critical knowledge.

Nearly all parents/guardians commented that they previously thought that college was not a possibility for their family given their financial circumstances; several had told their children that they could not consider college for financial reasons. This concern surfaced during the first session and recurred each week. For this reason, the program administrators focused on financial aid during the second week of the program. The community college conducted a comprehensive session that explained federal and state aid as well as scholarships and work-study options. They also included resources for undocumented students and information about the California Dream Act (California Student Aid Commission, 2013). Participants received a folder with financial-aid handouts and found it highly valuable. On the survey, 100% of parents/guardians ranked this session as most valuable and even requested more information about financial aid. One mother stated that this information completely changed how she approached the college-going process with her children:

One door open[ed] for her and us. For me, for my daughter, for my son. I have that other [child] that [spent] about three years in college... And, I didn't know they had the FASFA for students. We didn't know that. The whole year we paid the whole class, the books and all the stuff. Even I got a part-time job in a restaurant [while working] another job full time. We tried to help. So now I know and... I didn't know that before so that's why I think everybody's excited here.

Beyond financial aid, participants expressed that they learned about the services that the community college provides, including certificates and degrees, transition into college programs, tutoring, career counseling, and general support available for things like applications and financial

aid. Many stated that the fact that the community college would help them fill out the application and financial aid forms was important. In one session, the presenter explained that resources for the application were online and shared the website. A parent interrupted the presenter and asked if she could come to campus to do this instead. When the presenter confirmed that the community college had staff waiting to help people with admission forms, the entire group expressed relief and desire to complete the process this way.

By the end of the month, most parents used the word *informed* to explain how they felt about the college-going process. They had gained information and confidence about the community college, the application process, and how it could be a possibility for their UCE focus-child.

### *Support for children*

All participants articulated that by attending Parent University, they were supporting their children (including their focus-child) in navigating postsecondary options. Parents/guardians viewed participating in the program as a way to amplify their knowledge and extend it to their children. Parents discussed how knowing more about the college application process, financial aid, and different programs would help them guide their children, giving them the tools to be successful. As one mother explained:

I tried to let her know that hey, not just her but my other kids also, that we always want them to do better than what we done and they have so much more opportunities than what we had... I want her to have a better opportunity to say, "Hey I can go college and I can do this." ... I really don't want her to struggle... I want to make sure she has the tools and everything to take care of herself to raise herself and not depend on anyone... So I'm trying to provide the tools and the support for her.

However, the parents/guardians also expressed concerns about their focus-child's academic and social habits. Participants struggled to get their focus-child to attend high school and wondered about their students' motivation to attend college independently. One mother stated that her son was only attending school at Transformation because he was on probation. Others discussed the difficult process of getting the focus-children to complete homework assignments and school projects, skills they felt their child would need to do independently once in higher education. In addition, parents/guardians felt their focus-child's social habits, some which had landed them in juvenile detention, and desire to "just get a job at a warehouse" overshadowed their interest in exploring college. The parents felt frustrated navigating these realities while also trying to promote college.

This was a major concern: parents/guardians wanted to encourage their focus-child to pursue postsecondary education but felt like there were other obstacles to conquer before they could do so. Participants recognized that knowing more about the college-going process helped them feel more confident talking with their children. Nevertheless, this knowledge did not include strategies to support focus-children in deciding to attend college. Parents/guardians' role as supporters was dependent on their child's actions and, based

on recent antics, parents/guardians were wary about what this meant for the future.

Participants expressed some respite after the fourth session about strategies for talking and listening to children about their interests and future. On the survey, this session was ranked second-most valuable by all participants. One mother stated that her thinking shifted from “telling” her daughter about college and encouraging her to attend, to “listening” to her daughter’s interests and ideas. Several stated that discussions around the child’s interest, such as which certificate they might like to pursue, would help facilitate conversations about college. After considering the programs and majors offered at the community college, a few parents/guardians mentioned that their children might be interested in becoming a police or parole officer. They thought that this career might interest the focus-children because it connected to their current situations (formerly incarcerated) and could help them “understand the other side of things.” The parents were recognizing how their support could integrate with their child’s realities. Discussing interests and possible careers was one strategy that demonstrated their support without being punitive about grades or habits.

### **Abjection of focus-child’s needs**

While the Parent University sessions were sponsored by UCE and held on campus at a UCE alternative school, parents/guardians often discussed how the college-going information could be used for their other children or for themselves, as opposed to their focus-child. This was coupled with their concerns about how to best support their focus-child; the information presented seemed to be a better match for their children following a more traditional educational path. Parents commented that the information would be helpful for their younger children, who were generally performing well in traditional schools, or for their older children, who successfully graduated high school or received a GED. Some parents even reflected on how they never attended college; after the program, they were thinking about enrolling. Below, a parent explains how she intended to use the new knowledge:

Right now, like because our daughter is only a sophomore... [This information] will be helpful when the time comes. Because right now we aren’t having issues with her not wanting to do her homework... We see that she wants to go to college... Then maybe, when she’s ready, we will know more about it and how to approach the situation. (Note: the daughter was not enrolled in Transformation County School.)

Concerning their focus-children, parents/guardians cited other factors that they felt would impede the trajectory to college. Similar to previous concerns about supporting children, parents/guardians stated that their focus-child’s academic performance, social habits, motivation, and limited workforce vision would make the transition to college difficult in comparison to their other children. Several articulated how their focus-child’s academic performance had been interrupted by social factors: activities that landed them in juvenile detention. One mother commented, “[My

son] is a follower and that’s what’s gotten him into trouble. So just keeping him on track and supporting him has been my focus right now.” Low motivation to attend school and complete the required work were major concerns. Parents also said that their focus-children wanted to earn money after high school and felt okay doing warehouse or factory work instead of attending college. These behaviors were different from their other children, who were already thinking about college and experiencing academic success in high school.

While the community college did present the plausibility of formerly incarcerated youth applying to college and the supports for enrolled students, there was still concern about how the students would perform on campus without the structure or support of high school. Even though parents/guardians were there in support of their focus-child, they were mostly making sense of college-going from the perspective of traditional high school students. As a result, there was abjection of the focus-child from these conversations and from the curriculum.

### **Discussion**

Generally, Parent University was successful in its mission to support parents/guardians of formerly incarcerated youth learning about going to college. Interviews, observations, and survey data showed that the parents found the program informative and useful. On a scale of five, the parents’ average overall satisfaction with the program was 4.67. The quality of the sessions was also scored an average of 4.67 out of 5. In addition, the program attempted an asset-based approach to working with parents; the parents’ ideas and needs were carefully considered each week in planning the next session. Their voices were viewed as valuable and were included in the planning of the program, a first step to moving away from a deficit approach and toward responsive parent outreach. This pilot program was designed so that parents would see themselves as co-constructors of curriculum, find the sessions responsive to their needs, and be more invested in and empowered by the program (Auerbach, 1995).

However, Auerbach (2009) calls on school leaders to go beyond listening to families’ voices and “walk the walk” by forming authentic partnerships for planning and implementing familial outreach. While the pilot program responded to parents’ interests, it did not fully integrate the complex realities of families with formerly incarcerated youth into the college-going process. Asset-based family involvement centers around families’ cultural practices and advocates for equitable education opportunities for students (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004). To understand family outreach from this lens, educators must recognize that cultural practices include deeper reflections of daily practices (Nieto, 2010). For UCE’s families, navigating both the promises and the challenges that formerly incarcerated youth face when considering postsecondary options is a cultural reality. In this iteration of Parent University, participants voiced challenges, but they were integrated into the curriculum on a superficial

level—only one session at the end. While Parent University was received positively by its stakeholders, it missed the mark in trying to be inclusive of the cultural characteristics of UCE's formerly incarcerated students. Thus, the question of how the program could be more reflective of and responsive to this unique family population requires further exploration.

While Parent University was responsive to the parents' interests about the college-going process, it was less responsive to concerns about working specifically with UCE students. The debriefing sessions created a space for parents to express frustrations about children's academic and social performance and these conversations were important because they built relationships and trust amongst the participants. However, these feelings were not necessarily viewed by the program administrators as a part of the parents' needs for college-going information when, in fact, they were. Whether or not the participants apply their college knowledge to their focus-child may depend on the extent to which they see college as being a reality for this child. This became clear when parents began talking about applying their new knowledge to their other children who were experiencing success in traditional schooling. The focus-child's characteristics were generally viewed as a barrier to, as opposed to a component of, their trajectory into postsecondary education. Excluding topics such as criminal behavior, parole, motivation, and emotional/mental health from the conversation may send a message that UCE students could only attend college once these characteristics change, instead of recognizing that these attributes will be present on students' paths to postsecondary education. Since these realities are a part of the families' lives, they should be addressed as a component to the college-going process. For example, open discussions about navigating academic expectations, expunging juvenile records, or managing social pressures and mental health could be incorporated in the typical presentations about financial aid, applications, and academic programs. Integrating these sometimes gritty realities of formerly incarcerated youth into the Parent University sessions, instead of before or after, may help parents/guardians determine how the information pertains to the focus-child.

In their reflection, program administrators mentioned beginning the next iteration of the program with a discussion regarding parents' concerns about their child's academic and social habits and ways to support children in these areas. They suggested that beginning Parent University with the presentation about reaching out and talking with children may be a foundation for integrating and addressing these concerns throughout the program. This way, parents may learn more support strategies to use with their focus-child. By centering the parents' concerns in the program, the other attributes about college-going (financial aid, academic programs, and student life) could be more in tune with the UCE's student population.

The social and academic struggles that formerly incarcerated youth face is not news to UCE administrators. This is the crux of the intentions and dilemma of this program:

How could Parent University become more responsive to UCE's families in a way that moves beyond integrating parents'/guardians' interests and that, instead, truly draws on their cultural realities? How could families begin to see and understand college as a real possibility for formerly incarcerated youth? And, how could sessions be further adapted to illustrate that college could work for this student population? While enhancing the educational know-how and the educational attainment level for all family members may positively affect the focus-child in the long run, it is important to consider how the program could be more closely connected to the realities of formerly incarcerated youth. These findings also illuminate a flaw in our design to be responsive to parents' interests and needs. Despite parents/guardians indicating their concerns about their focus child each week, we did not incorporate these concerns into the official curriculum until the final session. Even though we designed a space for parents' voices in the program design in efforts to make Parent University responsive, we contributed to the abjection of UCE students by putting off addressing these needs until the end.

Based on our findings, we have several recommendations for implementing more responsive parent outreach in alternative school settings that align with research about additive approaches to working with families (Auerbach, 1995; 2009). While our recommendations center on Parent University, we surmise that they could be applied to myriad outreach alternative school initiatives. First, we recommend that familial outreach continues to include an opportunity for discussing and sharing experiences. Using the debriefing model during Parent University was effective for easing parents/guardians into this habit while also creating a structure for involving them as curriculum co-designers. By the end of the month, parents conversed more naturally and began participating more during the community college presentations. This practice promoted relationship building and created a supportive, friendly atmosphere. Equally important is incorporating the participants' preferred language throughout the sessions. Participants should be asked regularly which language they prefer in order to ensure that they are understanding the topics and given a full opportunity to participate.

Integrating more information about approaching and talking with adolescents in non-threatening, nonpunitive ways is something all stakeholders would like to see in future sessions. Participants ranked supporting students emotionally, socially, and academically first on the final survey. One way to approach this is by having more open discussions with folks with similar educational trajectories as UCE students and exploring the strategies they used to navigate postsecondary life. In addition to this, participants requested more information about other postsecondary pathways, majors, and careers. Parents/guardians articulated that they did not know about the different majors, certificates, and general career options available at the community college and there was confusion about the differences between community colleges and four-year universities. We recommend expanding the postsecondary options to include



universities, community colleges, and careers with an explanation of how these options complement each other.

Last, we recommend designing a parallel program for UCE students. During the month of Parent University, the presenters, the parents/guardians, and the administrators all spoke *about* the focus-child. However, missing from the conversation were *the voices of* the UCE students that these sessions were meant to benefit. We recommend creating a parallel program for students so they can explore their interests, career paths, and the differences between college and high school.

## Conclusion

The case study of Parent University demonstrates one framework for implementing an asset-based approach to familial outreach in alternative schools. While this program had shortcomings, it met several of the tenets of asset-based outreach through a responsive structure. This framework has laid the groundwork for strengthening UCE's parent outreach initiatives overall. At the time of writing, the district administrators were integrating the findings and recommendations from this research study to improve the Parent University curriculum for future use at multiple school sites. They were also considering incorporating the debriefing model to make other parent outreach programs more responsive to stakeholders. In line with Auerbach's (2009) call for true parent partnerships, they were looking at ways to include parents as partners in UCE familial outreach program development. While these initiatives are still in their infancy, they speak to the shift toward an additive model to working with parents of formerly incarcerated youth in a large, urban school district. In addition, these initiatives contribute to a developing field of family outreach: the unique characteristics and needs of parents of formerly incarcerated youth.

This case study presents a foundation for an asset-based approach to working with families and developing relevant curriculum with the ultimate goal of supporting formerly incarcerated youth in fulfilling meaningful postsecondary lives. More importantly, this approach sends a strong message to families that they matter, that familial outreach is reflective of their lives, and that programs are designed to support them and to meet their needs. Based on our findings, it is working. Parents saw Parent University as worthwhile and helpful. As one mother put it, "We can now see that there's hope."

## Notes on contributors

*Jen Stacy* is an assistant professor at California State University–Dominguez Hills, where she teaches pre-service teachers in the Liberal Studies Department. Her research focuses on family-school relations, with attention to the experiences of ethnically and linguistically diverse families.

*Linda Gutierrez* is an undergraduate student in the Liberal Studies Department at California State University–Dominguez Hills studying to become an elementary school teacher.

*Danita McMillian* is an undergraduate student in the Liberal Studies Department at California State University–Dominguez Hills studying to become an elementary school teacher.

## References

- Alamprese, J. (2004). Understanding adult education in the context of family literacy. In Wasik, B. (Ed.), *Handbook of family literacy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Anderson, J., Smythe, S., & Shapiro, J. (2005). Working and learning with families, communities, and schools: a critical case study. In Anderson, J., Kendrick, M., Rogers, T., Smythe, S., (Eds.), *Portraits of literacies across families, communities and schools: Intersections and tensions*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Auerbach, E. (1995). Deconstructing the discourse of strengths in family literacy. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 27(4), 643–661.
- Auerbach, S. (2009). Walking the walk: Portraits in leadership for family engagement in urban schools. *School Community Journal*, 19 (1), 9–31.
- Baquedano-Lopez, P., Alexander, R. A., & Hernandez, S. J. (2013). Equity issues in parental and community involvement in schools: What teacher educators need to know. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 149–182.
- California Courts. (2018). *Parenting resources*. Retrieved from: <http://www.courts.ca.gov/16473.htm>
- California Student Aid Commission. (2013). *California Dream Act*. Retrieved from: <https://dream.csac.ca.gov/>
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1990). *Literacy for empowerment: The role of parents in children's education*. London: Falmer Press.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1966). Family narratives in multiple literacies. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 36 (3), 263–272.
- Ed-Data. (2017). *Education data partnership*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ed-data.org/>
- Emerson, R., Fretz, R., & Shaw, L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic field notes* (2nd edn). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Galindo, R., & Medina, C. (2009). Cultural appropriation, performance, and agency in Mexican parent involvement. *Journal of Latinos in Education*, 8(4), 312–331.
- Harbin, G., Herrmann, S., Wasik, B., Dobbins, D., & Lam, W. (2004). Integrating services for family learning. In Wasik, B. (Ed.), *Handbook of family literacy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Jacobs, K. (2004). Parent and child together time. In Wasik, B. (Ed.), *Handbook of family literacy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Jasis, P., & Ordonez-Jasis, R. (2004). Convivencia to empowerment: Latino parent organizing at La Familia. *High School Journal*, 88 (2), 32–42.
- Johnson, L. (2009). Challenging "best practices" in family literacy and parent education programs: The development and enactment of mothering knowledge among Puerto Rican and Latina mothers in Chicago. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 40 (3), 257–276.
- Larocque, M., Kleiman, I., & Darling, S. (2011). Parental involvement: The missing link in school achievement. *Preventing School Failure*, 55 (3), 115–122.
- Lonigan, C., & Shanahan, T. (2012). Translating research into practice: results from the national early literacy panel and their implications in family literacy. In Wasik, B. (Ed.), *Handbook of family literacy*, (2nd edn). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Mandel, M., Mandelson, A., & Kuhn, M. (2010). Characteristics of three family literacy programs that worked. In Dunsmore, K. & Fisher, D. (Eds.), *Bringing literacy home*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Millikin-Lynch, P. (2009). Family matters: How one Somali Bantu family supported themselves and an American teacher in literacy learning. In Li, G., (Ed.), *Multicultural families, home literacies and*

- mainstream schooling*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing Inc.
- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31 (2), 132–141.
- Muth, W. (2011). Murals as text: A social-cultural perspective on family literacy events in US prisons. *Ethnography and Education*, 6 (3), 245–263.
- Naoon, S., Van Dyke, M., Fixsen, D., Blasé, K., & Villagomez, A. (2012). Developing implementation capacity of organizations and systems to support effective uses of family literacy programs. Wasik, B. (Ed.), *Handbook of family literacy*, (2nd edn). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Newton, X., Thompson, S., Oh, B., & Ferullo, L. (2017). Improving opportunities for bridging social capital: The story of a full-service community school initiative at an alternative high school. *The Educational Forum*, 81(4), 418–431.
- National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth [NDTAC]. (2015). *Fast facts: California*. Retrieved from: <http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/fast-facts/California>
- National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth (NDTAC). (2015). *Family and community engagement*. Retrieved from: <http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/topic-areas/family-and-community-engagement>
- Orellana, M. F. (1996). Aquí Vivimos voices of Central American and Mexican participants in a family literacy project. *The Journal of Educational Issue of Language Minority Students*, 16 (1), 1–11.
- Phillips, L., & Sample, H. (2005). Family literacy: Listen to what families have to say. In Anderson, J., Kendrick, M., Rogers, T., Smythe, S., (Eds.) *Portraits of literacies across families, communities and schools: intersections and tensions*. Mahwah, NJ: Larence Erlbaum Associates.
- Reyes, L. V., & Torres, M. N. (2007). Decolonizing family literacy in a culture circle: Reinventing the family literacy educator's role. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 7(1), 73–94.
- Rogers, T., & Schofield, A. (2005). Things thicker than words: Portraits of youth multiple literacies in alternative secondary program. In Anderson, J., Kendrick, M., Rogers, T., Smythe, S., (Eds.), *Portraits of literacies across families, communities and schools: intersections and tensions*. Mahwah, NJ: Larence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sidle Fuligni, A., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2004). Early childhood intervention in family literacy programs. In Wasik, B. (Ed.), *Handbook of family literacy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Stacy, J. (2017). Welcoming 'new'comers: Problematizing the Latina mothers' experiences in a family literacy program. *Sinéctica*, 48 (1), 33–52.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Staples-Farmer, S. (2014). *Racking up cultural capital and eliminating labels: The culture of teaching and learning in the juvenile justice system* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Digital Commons @ University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
- Turner, J., & Edwards, P. (2009). Implications of home literacies for teacher education, school learning, and family literacy programs. In Li, G. (Ed.), *Multicultural families, home literacies and mainstream schooling*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing Inc.
- Valdés, G. (1996). *Con respeto: Bridging the distance between culturally diverse families and schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Von Steensel, R., Herppich, S., McElvany, N., & Kurvers, J. (2012). How effective are family literacy programs for children's literacy skills? A review of the meta-analytic evidence. In Wasik, B. (Ed.), *Handbook of family literacy* (2nd edn). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.