



## **Global Research Showcase: Voices from the Field**

A Virtual Event Hosted by DISES  
September 21, 2024

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The Global Research Showcase: Voices from the Field included our panelists sharing on community engagement. Ms. Tessa Nelson-Neigum described Community Asset Mapping (CAM), a tool that could potentially improve community access to individuals with disabilities. Dr. Short was able to give us a virtual taste of our recent DISES Panama conference by providing ways we can foster stronger communities by enhancing family engagement in education.

### **Panelist Biographies**

The virtual session was moderated by **Saurym Quezada** (PhD Student, Florida State University) and featured **Dr. Maureen Short** (North Carolina Central University) and **Tessa Nelson-Neigum** (PhD student, University of Wisconsin-Madison). Dr. Maureen Short is a professor of Special Education and the department chair at North Carolina Central University. She is a thought leader and content expert in education, behavior disorders, and special education. An actively engaged international conference speaker, community leadership & outreach, grant writing, publications. Tessa Nelson-Neigum is a dedicated educator pursuing her PhD in the Department of Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Committed to improving educational access and outcomes in international rural communities, her research interests encompass teacher preparation, family-school partnerships, and reducing disability stigma and discrimination. Tessa shared her experiences as a K12 educator working with students with emotional and behavior disorders (EBD) for over 10 years before entering higher education.

### **Fostering Strong Communities by Enhancing Family Engagement in Education**

Dr. Maureen Short presented on the critical role of family engagement in education and effective strategies to cultivate a collaborative partnership between schools and families. Recognizing the value of collective involvement is a key factor in academic achievement and overall well-being for students. Dr. Short raised awareness of this crucial aspect of culturally responsive learning and effective strategies for fostering meaningful partnerships between schools and families (Aceves & Orosco, 2014). The session delved into the numerous benefits of strong family-school connections and provided practical insights for educators and administrators seeking to enhance family engagement in their institutions.

With statements like “not what you can do but what you can do *with* others,” Dr. Short highlighted the shared responsibility found in education. She emphasized the need to expose rising educators to families from varied socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds by embedding opportunities for community engagement in university teacher preparation programs

(TPPs). Dr. Short asserted how interactions with a broadly diverse educational landscape would support demystification of engagement with families, particularly those typified as uncaring and uninvolved. Moreover, intentionally planning for practicums and student-teaching opportunities in rural or “rough” neighborhoods can remove the novelty of working with these groups and normalize teacher-family engagement during teacher training. Such actions could increase the readiness of pre-service teachers and teacher graduates who are preparing to support their school communities.

Dr. Short also pointed to the broader social issues hindering effective family engagement including the historic/chronic social power dynamics influencing a lack of engagement among families, the lack of opportunity (e.g., resources, funding, support), and school system structure. Dr. Short personalized these barriers by providing examples of her own experiences as a parent and how these have led her research inquiry to not only admire the problem but also devise solutions. While not yet a parent during the years she lived in Kenya, Dr. Short drew connections to her childhood schooling experiences in the country and how this educational system and engagement opportunities compare to that of the United States. Dr. Short closed by reminding us that family engagement is ultimately about being culturally responsive and using that learning framework to inform our practices (Saucedo & Jimenez, 2021).

### **Community Asset Mapping**

Tessa Nelson-Neigum presented her work on Community Asset Mapping (CAM). Drawing on the work of Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), researchers framed CAM as a methodological tool used to identify the strengths within a community, and CAM has the potential to impact access to education for students with disabilities. Dr. Nelson-Neigum presented her systematic literature review on understanding how assets are located and apprehended. The review exposed the impact of asset mapping on education for students with disabilities and how researchers can use it to improve community access. Her results showed that limited educational research is available, specifically for students with disabilities. Further, this systematic review found that sustainability and measurement efforts could be improved. Tessa calls for agency and advocacy for students with disabilities, families, and other community stakeholders to look into what is an asset in their community and develop self-determination. This gives the community members a feeling of power within rather than power from outside, which will allow parents to have more capital to then advocate within the school system for the best for their children. Tessa also shared that CAM can help identify the gaps. For some students and families, especially for those having disabilities, schools are not an asset, for example, clubs are not accessible, there is a stigma about disability in the school, or there is no inclusive practice happening, etc. It is important to give community members, parents, and individuals with disabilities an opportunity to determine what they view as assets or placements that need improvement to promote inclusive practices. Tessa’s goal is to tie community resources to schooling and educational opportunities and inclusive education and to integrate CAP in teacher education programs.

### **Summary**

The group discussion during this event focused on the connection to power and exploring ways that families/caregivers can be engaged and involved in a partnership.

### **Connection to Power**

When working with family/caregivers educators and service providers need to be aware of their power— the power within ourselves and within the community. Yosso and Burciaga’s (2016) *Community Cultural Wealth* explores six capitals (knowledge, skills, and networks) that families/caregivers from culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and economically diverse

communities hold that positively impact the community that has not historically been honored. These assets include *aspirational capital*—having hopes and dreams even when experiencing barriers such as racism and ableism. *Linguistic capital* is gained when one is multilingual or able to express themselves in a variety of ways. The benefit of *social capital* is having access to strong networks and resources. *Navigational capital* refers to the ability to move through institutions/systems, especially those that were not made to accommodate you. *Familial capital* relates to the power of a nurturing family—whether that person is blood-related or not. Finally, *resistant capital* or the development of skills to challenge inequality within systems, institutions, and relationships. There is power for the individual and the community when these capitals are recognized, honored, and supported.

Dr. Short mentioned that, historically, many families have not had the same opportunities as their children. The world is constantly changing and this has created barriers because the experience of the elders does not always mirror youth. Additionally, she shares, “if parents had negative past experiences as students, they may be reluctant” to engage with the schools.

By recognizing the power we hold as educators to connect our youth and families/caregivers with resources and identify and honor their capitals, we can positively impact their experiences (Jez, 2023). Much of education is based on white cultural norms and those systems and practices need to be dismantled by educators and service providers (Sinclair et al., 2023). Often, students with disabilities and their families/caregivers are expected to fit into the structures determined by the teacher/school/program rather than their community values and needs. There is humility and power educators can develop by learning the reasons a family/caregiver struggles to get involved. An examination of mindset, biases, and white cultural norms is useful for all educators. Once we uncover why a family/caregiver might not be getting involved with their child’s school, we can address the systemic issues that are in play. In order to create equitable systems, teachers need to learn and apply culturally responsive and sustaining inclusive practices such as asking questions early, providing childcare during meetings/events, finding alternative ways to engage, and most importantly, working to get to know families/caregivers in their communities (Jez, 2023). As one audience member reminded us, we need to “remember that power is not given up easily,” therefore, educators need to be persistent in advocacy (Biesta, 2021). Finally, we were reminded that our learners, families/caregivers, and educators/support people benefit from developing self-efficacy and becoming changemakers within and for their communities (Jez, Hauth, & Ramers, 2022).

### **Being Engaged and Involved**

Ms. Nelson-Neigum stressed the important role that community plays in school education and shared that you really cannot have a school without a community. Sociology research shows that college students who went to talk and know community members have a greater sense of the community and a higher level of societal awareness than their peers who did not engage in community activities (Campbell, 2019; Chittum, Enke, & Finley, 2022). There is room to grow in that regard within teacher preparation by having our preservice teachers learn more about the community by engaging with community members. Family/caregivers are also part of the community. Ms. Nelson-Neigum shared that the department where she is working on her PhD program is offering some courses involving international and global community work to learn about community members. For example, they require students taking the *Introduction to Special Education* course to spend three weeks within a community.

Dr. Short and Dr. Ward echoed Ms. Nelson-Neigum’s ideas of community engagement in teacher education. She agrees that teacher educators need to ensure preservice teachers are getting involved in the community at the start of their training, rather than waiting until when the

teacher trainees are already out in the field. She hopes that historically underserved marginalized communities will see teachers become more engaged in their schools. To achieve this goal, we need to create opportunities at the teacher training level and extend them throughout the teaching experience. It is not a novel idea for a teacher to conduct a home visit, attend a school sports game, or even create events to bring families together. It is important that schools provide childcare services during school parent-teacher nights. Dr. Ward shared that parents lose out by not being present, many teachers hold a mindset that when families/caregivers are not present, they do not care about their child or school. She reiterated that this is not the case and our job is to find out why they are not involved and/or come up with creative ways to engage with families. We need to disrupt any preconceived idea of the families/caregivers and find out what is the root cause of that and explore how we can meet them where they are. Ms. Nelson-Neigum reminded us that this deficit-based perspective is not culturally responsive or relevant. This messaging should start in teacher training so that when schools invite parents and community members to the table they are part of a partnership, rather than being talked at and told what they should do. The conversation needs to continue together in order to find ways to strengthen these partnerships (Butcher, et al., 2003; Evans, 2018; Human-Vogel, & Dippenaar, 2013).

With regard to tools available for community engagement, Ms. Nelson-Neigum's literature review suggested that there are many iterations of Community Asset Mapping and there are a lot of terms for it. Dr. Short stressed that we, as educators, need to honor family/caregivers' care for their children. They care about their children and they want to get involved in their children's education, regardless of where they are. Anyone who sends their children to school wants to know how well their children are doing and what needs to happen to make schooling successful. Families/caregivers in Kenya and the U.S. have knowledge and skills that schools can benefit from as they were the first teacher of the child. Educators should keep that in mind and lean on families/caregivers to be a support. We need to address barriers such as time and the lack of resources (transportation, time off work, childcare) that it takes to engage with school events and meetings.

### **Recording**

A recording of *Global Research Showcase: Voices from the Field* can be accessed on the [DISES Youtube page](#) or <https://youtu.be/TV-7IMp0gRI>.

### **Resources to Explore**

#### **Dr. Maureen Short**

- Adams, K. S., & Christenson, S. L. (2000). Trust and the family-school relationship: Examination of parent-teacher differences in elementary and secondary grades. *Journal of School Psychology, 38*, 477–497.
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- Campana, K., Martens, M., Filippi, A., & Clunis, J. (2020). A “Library School:” Building a collaborative preschool-library partnership to support whole family engagement. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 50*, 71–82. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01127-4>

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- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (1997). Why do parents become involved in their children's education? *Review of Educational Research*, 67(1), 3-42.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543067001003>
- Kea, C. D., Sirgany, L., & Young, F. (2023). Family engagement: Developing relationship-rich partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse families to improve students' long-term life outcomes. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 0(0)  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599231175187>
- Kea, C.D., Young, F., & Sirgany, L. (2024). Using community and home supports to increase student achievement and family engagement among families of color. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599241242097>

### **Tessa Nelson-Neigum**

Collaborative for Neighborhood Transformation (2024). *What is asset based community development (ABCD)*. Retrieved from <https://www.neighborhoodtransformation.net/classes/>.

CNT is a city/community collaborative network seeking to assist movements of transformation in urban communities through faith-based organizations and everyday people. Their asset community based development (ABCD) toolkit provides guidelines and insights on the implementation and benefits of ABCD.

Nelson-Neigum (submitted for review). *Community Asset Mapping: Bridging the Gap Between Community and Schools for Students With Disabilities*.

This systematic literature presents findings of empirical studies on Community Asset Mapping from 2000-2023. The article exposes the impact of asset mapping on education for students with disabilities and its usage to improve community access. Findings also highlight the limited educational research on community asset mapping, specifically for students with disabilities. Implications and future research suggestions are discussed.

Robinson, S., & Notara, D. (2015). Building belonging and connection for children with disability and their families: a co-designed research and community development project in a regional community. *Community Development Journal*, 50(4), 724–741.

This article relates the outcomes of a project grounded in participatory research about facilitators and barriers to belonging and connection for young children with disability and their families within a regional Australian community. The article describes the research, reviews the effectiveness of the methods used, and discusses the innovative way the project extends participatory methods used in research into project management and community development with a group not often included in either participatory research or community development.

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