

PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS IN THE PROJECT L.I.F.T.
LEARNING COMMUNITY ABOUT THEIR ROLE IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Raymond Barnes, Jr.

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Approved by:
Adviser: Dana N. Thompson-Dorsey
Reader: Derrick D. Jordan
Reader: James Ellerbe

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ABSTRACT

RAYMOND BARNES: Perceptions of African American Parents in the Project L.I.F.T.
Learning Community about their Role in Student Achievement
(Under the direction of Dana N. Thompson-Dorsey)

The purpose of this study was to understand how African American parents engaged in their children's education to support their academic achievement in school. The study explores the "how" and "why" of African American parent involvement in an individual learning community in a southern urban school district. In this study, parent engagement and parent involvement are used interchangeably with a specific focus on actions and beliefs that African American parents demonstrate toward their children's achievement. The perceptions of African American parents in the study provide an explanation of the barriers to their engagement and how they perceive their individual roles, the school's role and the principal's role in creating opportunities for parental engagement.

This was an exploratory, single case study that explains African American parent engagement in the Project Leadership and Innovation for Transformation (L.I.F.T.) Learning Community of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) model for parent involvement was used to guide this study. One of the primary understandings of parent engagement in this study is that it is socially constructed by how and why parents engage for their children's achievement. Focus group interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of the perspectives of African American parents, and individual one-on-one interviews were conducted with principals to understand their actions and beliefs in supporting parent engagement in their schools.

African American parent participants believe they should support their children's academic achievement and they engaged in various ways to help their children achieve. This case study revealed the importance of schools being intentional in supporting the beliefs and actions that parents demonstrate towards their children's achievement.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all African American children who have life challenges beyond their control, African American children who have been declared “at-risk” and African American children who may have lost hope. I serve every day for your right to an education so that you will have the opportunity to fulfill your dreams and passions while being a productive contributor to society, your family, and particularly those in the African American community. Lastly, this is dedicated to my daughter, Rayven N. Barnes, who continues to give me joy as a proud father. Thank you for being an awesome daughter with a heart to advocate for all children and to bring smiles to the faces of everyone that you meet.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

Parents who actively engage in schools positively impact and influence student engagement and achievement (Ingram, Wolfe, & Liberman, 2007). Students show positive achievement gains during their grade school years when parents take an active role in their education. Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, and Weiss (2006) indicated that there was a positive correlation between parent engagement and student literacy achievement. Similarly, Sheldon (2007) noted that student attendance increased when parents were more involved in their children's education.

Parents are encouraged to become equal partners in their children's education (Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, & Raimondo, 2004). Decades of research findings have yielded compelling evidence of the positive impact that parental involvement has on student achievement and overall success in school (Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Given the fact that parents can and do make a difference in their children's education, the underrepresentation of parents as equal partners remains a problem (Allington & Cunningham, 2007). Despite the compelling evidence of the benefits of parental involvement, the literature notes barriers that separate parents from schools (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; O'Connor, 2001). Parental involvement in schools has been largely defined in

the literature by what schools can do to draw parents in to help educate children (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004).

In underserved, low-income communities, parent engagement is vital to the academic success and achievement of students. This is a challenge for many parents in these communities who have limited formal education, as they are less confident in their ability to become active partners in their child's education (Cooper, 2010). These parents generally do not know how to engage as partners in their child's school. This inability to engage is often interpreted by educators as disinterest, disconnection, and an unwillingness to engage in ways that will benefit a child's academic achievement (Cooper, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Fields-Smith, 2005).

African American parents who live in low-income communities experience a disconnect from the school, which has implications for loss of student learning and achievement (Cooper, 2009a, 2010; Fields-Smith, 2005). The disconnect is not limited to teachers. School leaders' and administrators' perceptions of African American parents' lack of engagement is a cause of African American students not achieving as well as their Caucasian peers (Cooper, 2009a, 2010; Fields-Smith, 2005).

African American parents who are poor, who are less educated, and whose cultural backgrounds and social values may differ from those of school officials often find it difficult to engage fully in their children's education (Henderson, et al., 2004). Because of these differences, parents may be viewed by school officials as lacking the necessary skills and competencies to assist their children with their education (Epstein, 1995), described by Nieto (2004) as the deficit perspective. However, Nieto noted that deficit explanations do not

account for the achievement of students who come from impoverished backgrounds and are able to achieve at high levels.

Nieto (2004) stated that most families cannot be involved in the day-to-day operations of their child's school, but most parents are involved in their children's education by the values they teach in the home and the explicit and implicit expectations they have for their children's schooling, including expecting their children to complete homework, asking their children about their day in school, exposing their children to other education experiences outside of school, and communicating to their children the importance of education. Nieto declared that families not involved in the school in traditional ways should not be penalized, and that their involvement should be honored. Through a series of case studies of low-income families, Nieto found that regardless of their economic background, working-class and low-income parents highly valued education (2004).

The important role that parents play in their children's education represents a rich resource for schools and communities as schools seek educational success for all children (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005), parental involvement represents a rich vein of continued parental influence in the lives of children as they develop through the elementary, middle, and high school years. While the research is clear about the benefits of parent engagement, there is much to learn about engaging African American parents and how educators working in predominately African American school communities view the role of these parents in their children's educational journey.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how African American parents understand their involvement in their children's education in an urban school context.

Parental involvement has been explored from the perspective of what schools can do to engage families, but few studies have explored parental involvement from the African American parents' perspective of their role in student achievement. The results of this study will be useful to school officials seeking to increase African American parental involvement in urban schools, to parents who seek to become more involved in their children's education, and to principals who seek to engage parents in their children's academic achievement.

Problem Statement

There is a recurring cycle of noninvolvement among African American parents in the school setting (Brandon & Brown, 2009). Research indicates that parental involvement in the education process is related to academic and behavioral success of students. School personnel must understand the barriers created at the school that might lead to less parent participation (Thompson, 2003a). Considering the benefits and barriers described in parent involvement literature, further investigation is needed to specifically identify African Americans' perceptions of their role in student achievement. Because of these findings, the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community has a focus on parent engagement and this research is designed to investigate the perceptions of African American parents regarding their role in student achievement.

Context of the Study

The researcher conducted an exploratory, intrinsic, single case study with the purpose of explaining the "how" and "why" (Yin, 2014) of African American parents' engagement in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community. According to Creswell (1998), an intrinsic case study is a case selected for its uniqueness. The study was conducted in the Project Leadership and Innovation for Transformation (L.I.F.T.) Learning Community of Charlotte-

Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in Charlotte, North Carolina. Project L.I.F.T. is a public and private partnership organized as a non-profit organization, operating as one of ten learning communities in CMS. This study focused on four of the nine schools in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community. Project L.I.F.T. is a transformational learning community that changes the way students who traditionally perform poorly in school are educated by ensuring these students are equipped and ready to enter the 21st century and beyond. Project L.I.F.T. has a focus on time, talent, technology, and community and parent engagement. CMS is one of the largest urban school districts in the United States, serving over 148,000 students. African American students are the largest racial/ethnic group in the school district, making up 42% of the student population. The racial/ethnic distribution of the remaining student population is 32% Caucasian, 18% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Asian, and 3% Multiracial. Project L.I.F.T. serves 7,183 students, 80% of whom are African American. The racial/ethnic distribution of the remaining student population of Project L.I.F.T. is 2% Caucasian, 11% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Asian, and 2% Multiracial.

Purpose Statement

In a literature review conducted by Henderson and Mapp (2002), many of the studies noted the relationship between parent engagement and improved school performance. Students with involved parents, no matter the income level or background, are more likely to succeed in school. Henderson and Mapp's research was organized into three broad categories that reviewed: (a) the impact of family and community involvement on student achievement; (b) effective strategies connecting schools, families, and communities; and (c) parent and community organizing to improve schools. The research yielded that parent involvement led to higher grade point averages and scores on standardized tests or rating

scales, more classes passed and credits earned, enrollment in more challenging academic programs, better attendance, and better social skills. In relation to parent, family, and community organizing, the results of the study indicated equal benefit for schools. There was evidence of higher quality learning programs for students, new resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum, and improved after-school programs and family supports. The research conducted by Henderson & Mapp (2002) clearly indicated that schools placing an emphasis on family involvement have students who perform better than students at schools lacking effective parent engagement strategies.

The Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community has an emphasis on parent engagement with a goal of improved student performance. This aspect of the learning community is referred to as the parent engagement pillar, designed to develop and implement strategies to increase the level of parent engagement throughout the learning community. The purpose of this study was to investigate the African American parents' perception of parental engagement in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community.

Research Questions

The overarching research question in this study is: What are the perceptions of African American parents about parent engagement in the urban school context? This study is guided by four research questions.

1. What are Project L.I.F.T.'s African American parents' beliefs about their role in their child's academic achievement?
2. What are Project L.I.F.T.'s African American parents' beliefs about the school's role in their child's academic achievement?

3. How do Project L.I.F.T.'s African American parents partner with the school for their child's academic achievement?

4. How do Project L.I.F.T.'s school principals perceive the role of African American parents in student achievement?

Conceptual Framework

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) model suggests that parents are motivated by two belief systems: (a) role construction for involvement, and (b) sense of efficacy for helping their child succeed in school. The parent role construct is defined as the parent's belief about what they are supposed to do for their child's education and the parents' demonstrated behaviors as they support their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Role construction in the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) model is socially constructed, meaning it is based on parents' experiences of schooling. These experiences often include "the parent's personal experiences with schooling, prior experience with involvement, and ongoing experiences related to the child's schooling" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, p. 108).

The second motivator in the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) model is self-efficacy, or the behaviors or actions that parents demonstrate to support desired outcomes. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) assert that self-efficacy is like role construction in that it is socially constructed. Because self-efficacy is a social construct, schools and other groups or organizations can have a significant influence on parents' sense of efficacy for supporting their children's success.

The researcher used the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model as a guide for developing a positive parent engagement exemplar that illuminates the perceptions of African American

parents and their role in student achievement. The researcher also examined other ways in which African American parents of the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community engaged in their schools and how the schools can support parental engagement to improve student achievement.

Significance of the Study

This study was significant in that the researcher collected parent perspectives of how they were actively engaged in their child's achievement in school. Smalley and Reyes-Blanes (2001) asserted that actively involving parents in lower-income communities in inner cities remains a challenge for educators. Cooper and Crosnoe (2007) argued that a lack of money, time, and energy limit economically disadvantaged African American parents' level of involvement in their child's education. Similarly, Lareau (2003) indicated that parents in lower socioeconomic communities do not have access to the same financial and educational resources as middle class parents.

The financial barrier exists in the Project L.I.F.T Learning Community. Project L.I.F.T. has a focus on parent engagement and has funded parent engagement initiatives for the past five years, providing money, resources, staff, and time. This study provided insight into African American parents' perspectives on how these strategic efforts support them in their child's achievement.

The purpose of this case study was to examine African American parents' perspective of their involvement in their children's education in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community. Parental involvement has been explored from the perspective of what schools can do to engage families, but few studies have explored parental involvement from the African American parent's perspective. The results of this study will be useful to Project

L.I.F.T. school officials seeking to increase African American parental involvement, and to parents who seek to become more involved in their children's education. The benefits of this study were:

- Insight for educators regarding whether or not the current partnership frameworks for parental involvement are comprehensive enough to encourage African American parents to become involved;
- African American parents spoke in their own voices, and provided valuable insight into their role in supporting their children's education, and the ways in which they supported their children's education that may have been overlooked or not recognized by school officials; and
- African American parents shared their perceptions of the relationships they established with teachers and other school officials that have benefitted their children's education.

Limitations

This study provided a general perspective of the perceptions of African American parents and their role in student achievement in the urban context. The details inherent in the study will be useful for others in urban education. The study was limited to one learning community in one urban school district with one high school serving grades 9 through 12, one middle school with grades 6 through 8, five pre-kindergarten through grade 8 schools and one elementary school serving pre-kindergarten through grade 5. Additionally, the potential biases of the researcher, who is an African American parent of an elementary student in the school district as well as a principal in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community, are limitations to this study.

Definitions of Parent Engagement

Parent engagement in education can be defined in different ways and does not have a universal meaning (Anguiano, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Wendy S. Grolnick (2009) argued that there are three dimensions of parental involvement based on how parent-child interactions affect student academic achievement and motivation: (a) behavioral involvement, (b) personal involvement, and (c) cognitive and intellectual involvement. Behavioral involvement refers to the parents' public actions representing their interest in their child's education, demonstrated by the parents attending an open house event or volunteering at school. Personal involvement includes parents communicating to the child a positive attitude about school and the importance of education. Cognitive and intellectual involvement refers to the behaviors that promote a child's skill development and academic knowledge (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997). Parent involvement from Wendy Grolnick et al. (1997) perspective affects student achievement because the interactions of the parents affect the motivation of the children and their belief in having control over their success in school.

In a study by Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman (2007), 49% of parent respondents defined their role as "someone who works with the teacher and continues learning activities at home" (p. 488). Other definitions included "encouraging, motivating, assisting, helping, tutoring, supporting, counseling, guiding, mentoring, modeling, parenting, disciplining, teaching morals and values, praising, and loving" (p. 488). Additional roles that parents defined were not consistent with Epstein's (1995) framework. "Those roles are having high expectations, teaching the importance of a good education, and providing the best education possible" (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007, p. 488).

In a broad context, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) and Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Burrow (1995) asserted that parent involvement included home-based activities such as helping with homework and discussing school activities, and school-based activities such as volunteering at school and attending school events. Based on this theory, parent involvement is a function of their beliefs about parental roles and responsibilities, their perception that they can help their child succeed in school, and opportunities for involvement provided by the school or teacher. When parents are involved with their children at home and at school, the children acquire knowledge, skills, and an increased sense of confidence to succeed.

Joyce Epstein (1995) argues that school, family, and community are important aspects of a child's development. Epstein (2001) refers to the three aspects of school, family, and community as spheres of influence that are vital to the child's educational development. Epstein's model for parent involvement encourages an overlap of school, home, and community to create six types of involvement: (a) parenting, (b) communication, (c) volunteering, (d) learning at home, (e) decision-making, and (f) collaboration with community (2001). She asserts that the overlapping of the spheres and implementing activities across all six types of involvement improve student achievement and experiences in school.

According to Hill et al., (2004), parents working with both the schools and their children at home to support their child's education and future plans defines parent involvement. Hill et al. (2004) also noted that parental involvement may include several roles in which parents engage to support their children's education. Parent engagement in schools is also evidenced by participation in school events, communication with school

personnel, homework assistance, and getting to know other families and members of the community (Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Dearing et al., 2004).

Lee and Bowen (2006) asserted that parent engagement can be defined in home context, which may include “helping with homework, discussing the child’s school work and experiences at school and structuring home activities” (p. 194). Additionally, Lee and Bowen (2006) defined the school context of parent engagement as parents “attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at school and being involved in school sponsored activities” (p. 194). “Currently, parents’ roles and involvement in schools have been understood in terms of ‘what they do’ and how that fits or does not fit with the goals of the school” (Howard & Reynolds, 2008, p. 84).

Definition of Terms

The definitions of terms that follow are intended to serve and assist the reader as a reference regarding the content of the study.

- Equal partners: Parents and school staff having mutual interest in the decision-making and knowledge process for students.
- Indigenous insider: “Endorses the unique values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge of his or her indigenous community and culture and is perceived by people within the community as a legitimate community member who can speak with authority” (Tillman, 2006, p. 272).
- Low-Income: Defined as 50% of the median family income for a given metropolitan area.

- Parent: Broadened term recognizing families that include grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, sisters, brothers, and legal guardians acting as parents – charged with the care of the child (Tillman, 2002).

- Partnership: The development of a multi-level relationship with common beliefs, shared vision(s) for learning, sharing of information and data; structure of the partnership varying in reference to relationships between families and schools, schools and community (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010).

- Parental engagement/involvement: “A dynamic, interactive process in which parents draw on multiple experiences and resources to define their interactions with schools and among school actors” (Howard & Reynolds, 2008, p. 84).

- Student Achievement: Academic outcome of student performance in school as measured by course grades and standardized state tests.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Public schools are confronted with challenge of closing the achievement gap between African American and White students (O’Sullivan, 2013). Because of this, school explore several strategies to decrease the gaps that exist, but this challenge continues remain at the forefront for public education (Pitre, 2014). Focusing on engaging parents is a strategy that educators and researchers have found to be effective with increasing the achievement of African American students. Parental involvement is strongly associated with academic achievement among African American students (Educational Testing Service, 2007). Collaboration between parents and schools has become increasingly important as society has recognized that schools alone cannot educate students (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005). When educational lenses are focused on African American students, the data reveal that these students do not fare well academically, socially, or behaviorally compared with their Caucasian, non-Hispanic peers (Colombo, 2006; National Research Council, 2001). Often, this poor achievement is attributed to a lack of parental involvement, even in the face of current research justifying the involvement of parents in the education of their children (Yan & Lin, 2005).

Children learn best when the adults in their lives provide a common message and unite to support them (Comer, 2005). Epstein (1995) called this common message the “overlapping spheres of influence” (p. 72) comprised of the family, the school, and the

community in which students learn and grow. The partnership among individuals in these three spheres locates the child at the center. But as society has become more complex and demanding, with schools placing a stronger focus on high stakes testing and parents focusing on maintaining employment, relationships among homes, schools, and communities have not remained a priority (Comer, 2005). Parents are overwhelmed by their work schedules, personal lives, and economic struggles. Teachers are overwhelmed with additional responsibilities for students, teaching, and grading tasks. School administrators feel the pressure of federal, state, and district mandates to raise student achievement levels as defined by high-stakes testing.

The lack of honest and consistent communication has resulted in an environment of mistrust between families and educators (Comer, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). However, children cannot afford to have these relationships severed. The complexity of involving parents is related to the professional school culture that administrators have worked hard to create (Fullan, 2001). While teachers are enjoying more professionalism with regard to teaching qualifications, degrees in education, and ongoing professional development, a lack of training in the creation of partnerships with families still exists (Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

Previous studies revealed that increases in parental involvement can advance students' academic performance (Drummond & Stipek, 2004) and, as a result, the significance of familial support has been stressed in discussions concerning the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged and middle-class children. The emphasis on parent involvement has many benefits to include better student performance in multiple aspects of school to improved student behavior, lower absenteeism rates and more positive attitudes toward

school (Hayes, 2011). Prior research also indicated that both African American and low-income parents consider educational attainment a means to economic and social security, but their actual involvement frequently leaves much to be desired in terms of school expectations (Drummond & Stipek, 2004).

Epstein (1995) posits that school involvement such as volunteerism, participating in fundraising activities, membership in the local school board, and membership in parent-teacher organizations makes parents' efforts more visible, which communicates a belief that they are concerned about their child's educational success and further encourages collaboration between the home and school. Although many parents participate at the primary grade level, their involvement is likely to decline as a student progresses through middle and high school (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). These forms of involvement can include establishing and communicating high expectations to children, volunteering at the school, communicating with teachers and administrators, serving on various education-centered committees, and involvement in the home, including discussing school activities and offering other elective opportunities for educational enhancement (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

In some instances, schools outline participation for families (Lawson, 2003). These activities may range from allowing parents limited power and influence (e.g., involvement in the home); to minimal participation (e.g., clerical, extracurricular, cultural, and child development activities at schools); to more common contributions (e.g., service as classroom assistants, inclusion in parent-teacher associations); or more powerful roles that treat parents as partners (e.g., school improvement, evaluation, and reform committees). Questions about how these strategies affect parent involvement persist (Lawson, 2003). The traditional categorizations and strategies of parental engagement (e.g., attendance at school events,

workshops, PTA meetings, and academic conferences) have been criticized as not adequately representing the involvement of African American parents. Their low participation rates have often led educators to conclude that these parents are uninterested in their children's academic performance (McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown, & Lynn, 2003).

Legal Mandate for Parent Engagement

Academic achievement, typically measured by multiple standardized assessments, is a focal point for our nation's educational system. Parents are considered valuable human resources, according to federal legislation that addresses educational issues (Fege, 2006). High stakes testing takes place in schools throughout the country in an effort to measure achievement at several points on the educational process. According to performance measurements on state and local assessments, American students, especially African American students, consistently fall short of academic proficiency in core subject areas such as reading, math, and science (Fege, 2006).

Parent involvement in the education of their children increases overall achievement and academic performance as measured by high stakes testing. Past educational reform efforts, meant to increase student achievement, have barely recognized the power of parents when seeking to change schools and improve students' academic outcomes. More recent reform efforts have sought to increase parent participation, and even call for a partnership between parents and schools. The rationale for the partnership is to value and leverage the parents' power to positively impact change in student achievement as they serve in key decision-making roles in school operations (Fege, 2006).

During the 1990s and into the 21st century, three major reforms were initiated: America 2000, Goals 2000: Educate America Act, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Kampwirth,

2006). NCLB was a reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and an extension of the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994. NCLB was a more specific and directive method of approaching parent engagement and partnerships than some of the former legislations. NCLB legislation provided the opportunity for action, engagement, and collaboration between parents and schools, especially the low performing schools that receive federal funds.

The 2002 introduction of NCLB was considered by many school and government officials as the most significant education legislation since ESEA. NCLB was viewed as the "landmark in education reform designed to improve student achievement and change the culture of America's schools" (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, p.1). Since 2002, the bill has been heavily scrutinized and criticized by some school officials and policy makers because of the lack of funding to support the bill and the heavy emphasis on high stakes testing to determine student achievement (Dingerson, Beam, & Brown, 2004). Despite the criticism, there are a few features of the legislation that call for the inclusion of those historically excluded from the educational process (Fege & Smith, 2002) and the empowerment of parents in the decision making process. NCLB promoted the academic success of all students through authentic, power sharing partnerships among schools, parents, and communities. NCLB emphasized the need for all stakeholders to work collaboratively and to share in the decision-making process. In a section of the bill dedicated to parent involvement, the authors loosely described parent involvement as a partnership that envisions parents having governance power within a democratic process. Although there was a heavy emphasis on academic achievement, parent involvement is not limited to academic

achievement, but should include equity, participation, and representation of all parents in the school.

The most recent law sign by President Barack Obama on December 10, 2015 is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. ESSA addresses many of the challenges of NCLB in that it gives states more control and flexibility over the assessment systems, increases funding for schools (Senate Committee On Health, Education, Labor, and Pension, 2015), and encourages the inclusion of parents in the educational process. ESSA specifically calls for parents to be meaningfully involved and consulted in the development of the state and school district education plan. The term “meaningful” refers to measureable student outcomes. ESSA requires parents to be involved in the creation of the “state report cards” that provides information on how all schools in the state are performing. The report cards are to be created and written in a parent-friendly manner so that families can understand the provided information. The law requires all Title I school districts that have a high percentage of families living below the poverty line to have a written parent and family engagement policy to strengthen the relationship between schools and families to support student achievement (National Office of Government Affairs. October 2016. *Family Engagement in the New Law*).

The ESSA law uses the term “parent and family engagement,” rather than parental involvement to require districts and schools to carry out at least one of the following strategies to engage families effectively: a) professional development for school staff, which could include parents, and; home-based programs, b) information dissemination, and c) collaboration with community organizations and other related activities. Additionally, districts and schools must establish expectations and objectives for meaningful parent and

family engagement in its policy. The ESSA law specifies that parents who are economically disadvantaged, are disabled, have limited English proficiency, have limited literacy, or are of any racial or ethnic minority group have barriers that hinder their participation in their child's education. Districts and schools are to establish evaluation tools and methods to identify the type and frequency of school-home interactions and the needs of parents and families have to better support their child's learning. The evaluations are to target at least three key areas: a) barriers, b) ability to assist learning, and c) successful interactions.

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 has more specific measures that districts and schools must adhere to for parent and family engagement. ESSA provides more clarity and specification to NCLB, but also provides new measures for districts and schools such as the evaluation tool for parent and family engagement, requiring professional development and allocating parent and family engagement 1% set aside funds in Title I to schools with high needs schools being priority.

Parent Involvement Models

For the past 20 years, parent involvement research, policy, and practice have been dominated by Epstein's (1995) model of family-school-community partnerships (Auerbach, 2007). The Epstein model is based on a theory of overlapping spheres of home, school, and community influences that shape children's learning and development, and a six-part typology of forms of parent involvement that schools should promote (Auerbach, 2007). The six typologies are (a) parenting, (b) home-school communication, (c) volunteering at school, (d) learning at home, (e) school decision making, and (f) community-school connections. Although this is a useful model for schools, it does not place emphasis on school-based involvement and the priorities of educators (Auerbach, 2001). The Epstein framework

promotes partnerships; however, the “quantitative studies based on it fail to account for the needs and experience of many parents of color/low income as well as structural constraints on their actions and relations with schools” (Auerbach, 2007, p. 253).

In a study of Hawk Elementary School, the Epstein Parent Involvement Model was used to assess its effectiveness in high-poverty and high-minority schools. The researchers defined parental involvement in terms of both “traditional strategies (such as attending conferences and school events and responding to requests and communications from the school) and less traditional strategies (such as participating in home learning activities and parental ownership of some aspects of the school)” (Bower & Griffin, 2011, p. 80). Hawk Elementary School is a small, urban school in the southeastern United States. The school has a student population of 347, with 60.5% African American, 33.1% Hispanic, and 6.4% Multi-Racial and Caucasian. This is a high poverty school with 92.5% of the students receiving free or reduced lunches. Two members of the administrative team and five teachers participated in this study.

Bower and Griffin (2011) found that Hawk Elementary School’s strategies for parent involvement aligned more with traditional types of parent involvement. The primary research question that drove the study was “Why does parent involvement continue to remain a struggle at Hawk Elementary?” The results of the study indicated that teachers were not building effective relationships with parents and that Hawk Elementary School needed to develop new strategies for parental involvement that worked better with the population it served. “Epstein Model may not fully capture how parents are or want to be involved in their children’s education, indicating that new ways of working with parents in high-minority, high-poverty schools are warranted” (Bower & Griffin, 2011, p. 84).

Building relationships is necessary to gain the trust of parents. School staff is often encouraged to reach out to parents to establish a positive relationship from the beginning of the school year. School leaders may require staff to reach out to build these positive relationships without having a focus for how the relationships will impact students and benefit the school as a whole. Christianakis (2011) offered two models for schools to consider for parent involvement. The first model is the Partnership Model. The partnership model consists of six components:

- (1) Parenting: to encourage and support learning at home.
- (2) Communication: to exchange information between home and school.
- (3) Volunteering: to recruit and train parents to help in school.
- (4) Learning at Home: to train parents for homework and to create learning environments at home.
- (5) Decision Making: to involve parents in school governance, such as the PTA, committees, and councils.
- (6) Collaborating with Community: to coordinate resources and work from civic organizations and businesses to strengthen community ties.

The Partnership Model supports students in the home context as well as the school context. Christianakis (2011) contends that this model is effective because it allows teachers and parents to work together for a common goal of creating better outcomes for students.

The second model that Christianakis (2011) offers is the Empowerment Model. Student outcomes improve in this model because parents have the ability to engage with schools in the capacity of influencing policy and operational structures in the school which impacts the cultural needs of the school community. Christianakis offers that this model is

most effective when there are high levels of social networking and interactions between parents and school staff.

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) model of parent involvement is useful for its attention to parent perspectives and elaboration of the concept of parent role construction. The four-part model theorizes that parent role construction is the key predictor in whether parents become actively engaged in their children's education (Auerbach, 2007). The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model is "highly generative, but calls for adaptation when applied to working-class parents of color" (as cited in Auerbach, 2007, p. 256). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) identify three constructs that influence parents' involvement in children's education (Auerbach, 2007). The first construct is parents' perception of their role. Parents' notions about their parenting roles impact their beliefs, which then guide their behavior around their children's education. The second construct is parents' sense of efficacy, which is pivotal to their sense of whether they are able to get involved in their child's education and whether their efforts to help and support will result in positive outcomes. The third construct is parents' perception of the invitations, demands, and opportunities for school involvement put forth by their children and the school. "Together, these three constructs form the basis of a parent's decision to get in the educational process" (Auerbach, 2007, p. 481). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) also claimed that the expectations that groups and associations hold for their members may become recursive: "They influence the scope, level, and nature of parent involvement in children's schools" (Lawson, 2003, p. 81).

Researchers conducted an exploratory study of parents from 43 public middle schools in a large metropolitan area, investigating parents' role beliefs in schools serving lower-

income families. The researchers used the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parent involvement. The model contains variables that examine parent involvement from the perspectives of the parent, and includes five levels that inform parents' initial decision to become involved in their child's education (see Fig. 1). Levels one and two of the model address the parent's decision-making process; levels three, four, and five delineate how parent involvement affects student achievement.

The researchers examined parents' beliefs about their roles in their children's learning, and how their prior experiences with schools shaped their involvement (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Two research questions were investigated in the study:

1. How are parents' valence toward school, perceptions of student invitations, teacher invitations, school expectations, and perceptions of school climate related to their beliefs about their role in supporting their children's education?
2. Do parents' current experiences with schools – reflected in contextual invitations to involvement – influence their role beliefs more than their prior experiences with schools, as reflected in their valence toward schools? (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013, p. 80).

The conclusion of this exploratory study “highlighted the need for continued investigation into parental engagement, especially in schools serving low-income communities” (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013, p. 95). Knowing how parents were involved in the school was another finding from the study. Whitaker and Hoover-Dempsey (2013) indicated that conducting interviews would allow parents to describe their relationships and experiences in the school.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model for parental involvement focuses on why parents become involved in their child's education, and how they get involve impacts the

achievement of their child. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model in Figure 1 identifies the constructs that are central to why parents become involved. Level 1 of the model focuses on what motivates parents to become involved in their child's education. Level 1.5 focuses on the types of involvement some families choose. Level 2 focuses on the learning mechanisms parents engage in during the course of involvement. Level 3 focuses on how students perceive their parents' involvement. Level 4 focuses on the important student proximal learning outcomes that are influenced by parents' involvement. Lastly, Level 5 focuses on student achievement.

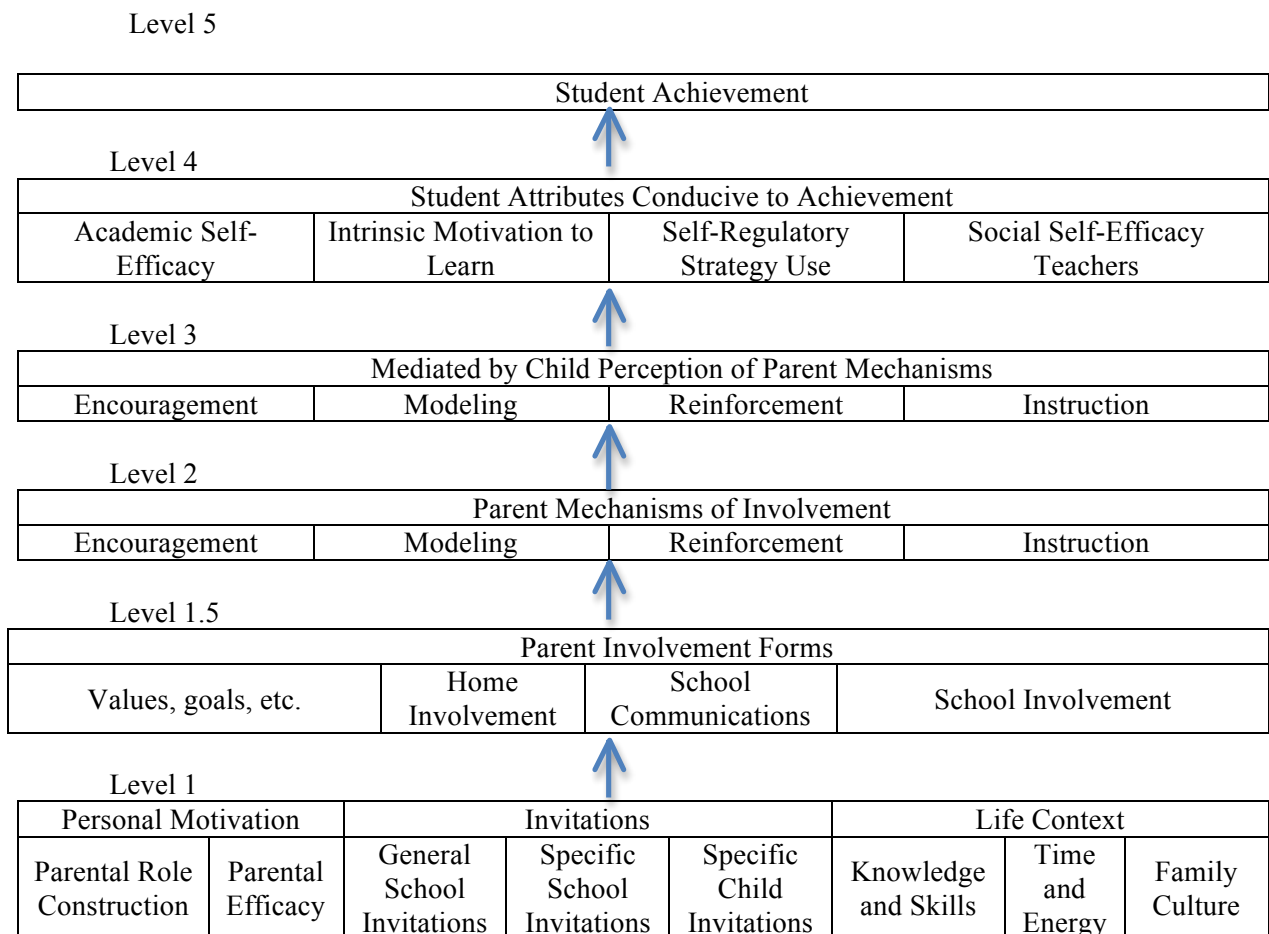


Figure 1. The Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler model of parental involvement. From “Parent Involvement: Model Revision through Scale Development.” By J. M. Walker, A. S. Wilkins, J. R. Dallier, H. M. Sandler, and K. V. Hoover-Dempsey, 2005, *The Elementary Journal*, 1062(2), p. 86. Copyright 2007 by the Holder Publications.

Correlation between Parent Engagement and Student Achievement

In the meta-analysis study of K-5 parental involvement programs by Jeynes (2005) included 19 studies among hundreds that met rigorous standards of research. This research included: (a) parent activities outside of school, (b) academic achievement measured as an outcome, and (c) treatment and control groups created by random assignment. The specific interventions used in this study to measure parent involvement were:

- Collaborative reading: Parents and children reading together as a structured activity.
- Education and training: A program designed to provide parents with appropriate teaching or support, skills-based activities, materials, or information to be used with their child outside the school day.
- Education and training in math: A program to provide parents with specific math skills to be applied to activities, materials, or information used with their child outside the school day.
- Education and training in science: Parents participate in workshops designed to guide them in engaging in science activities with their child.
- Math games: Parents use card and dice games to illustrate specific math skills.
- Reading games: Non-specific, parent-child game activities that involve reading tasks.
- Parent rewards and incentives: Parents provide rewards or incentives to their child outside the school day for the child's performance in school (Jeynes, 2005, p. 14). The results from Jeynes, (2005) showed a statistically significant correlation between student success and parent involvement. When the 95% confidence interval was applied, the academic performance of the children in the experimental parent involvement group was

approximately half a standard deviation higher than the academic performance of the children in the control group. More students performed at a higher level when parents were engaged in the listed interventions.

Ferguson (2005) found that some parenting programs produce desired improvements in achievement and some do not. Specific interventions may have different effects in various school settings. Therefore, he concluded, strategies must differ based on the particular population that the school serves, they must be reevaluated as populations change, and they must build the capacity for parents to improve their own situations. Loury (2002) noted that low-income families are often stigmatized by assumptions of inferiority by school staff. Parents need to believe that the school cares about and respects their children before they will consider getting involved at the school. An understanding of perceptions, roles, possible responsibility reconstructions, and culture shifts is needed before implementing a parent engagement program. The voices of parents, teachers, and administrators should be recognized before the implementation of any new programs in order to meet the condition of partnership rather than assumed support (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Decker, Decker, & Brown, 2007).

As stated in the larger body of the literature, student achievement improves when parents are actively engaged in the school and in the child's education. This is particularly true in urban areas. Jeynes (2003) undertook a meta-analysis that included 20 studies in an effort to determine the effects of parental engagement on the academic achievement of minority students. The areas studied were: (a) the extent to which parents communicated with their children about school, (b) whether or not parents checked their child's homework, (c) parent expectations for their child's academic success, (d) parents encouraging their child

to do outside reading, (e) parents attending or participating in school functions, and (f) to what extent there were household rules regarding school and leisure activities. The study included approximately 12,000 students in six racial groups: (a) mostly African American, (b) all African American, (c) mostly Asian American, (e) mostly Latino and Asian American, and (f) all Latino and Asian American (Jeynes, 2003). The researchers in these studies used four different measures of academic achievement to assess the effects of parental involvement: (a) the overall components of academic achievement combined, (b) grades, (c) academic achievement as measured by standardized tests, and (d) other measures. Results for the African American participants revealed that all of the aspects of parental involvement had a significant positive influence on academic achievement, with parents checking homework having the greatest impact.

In 2007, Jeynes undertook another meta-analysis that included 52 studies to determine the influence of parental involvement on the educational outcomes of urban secondary school children in grades 6 through 12. Four educational measures were used in the study. “These measures include an overall measure of all components of academic achievement combined, grades, standardized tests, and other measures that generally included teacher rating scales and indices of academic attitudes and behaviors” (Jeynes, 2007, p. 82). The study revealed that parent involvement programs had a positive impact on grades and other measures, but they did not have a positive impact on standardized tests. The area of parental expectations yielded a larger positive impact on the different academic measures. Although the studies included both Caucasian and minority children, the results for African American children were similar to the 2003 findings. A few additional findings in this meta-analysis not included in the earlier 2003 analysis included: (a) parent expectation had a greater impact on

student educational outcomes than some of the other aspects of parental involvement; (b) the broad association between parental involvement and school achievement was one of the most encouraging patterns to emerge from the study; and (c) “The results of this study are particularly important, given the achievement gap between urban students and their counterparts in non-urban areas. Indeed, this study’s findings suggest parental involvement may effectively contribute to reducing that gap” (Jeynes, 2007, p. 104). According to these results, parents who convey high expectations for success in school have greater impact on their children’s achievement. If parents are more involved with their children’s learning, the expectation of student achievement is high. This report was also encouraging in that it projected the end of or a reduction in low achievement among African American students. Spera (2006) addressed adolescents’ perceptions of parental goals, practices, and styles in relation to their motivation and achievement. His study revealed that adolescents’ perceptions of their parents’ involvement in their schoolwork were positively and significantly related to their interest in school. This study involved 184 seventh and eighth grade students from two schools. The first school ($n = 96$) was a suburban public middle school in Maryland; the second ($n = 88$) was a large urban middle school in Pennsylvania. African Americans represented 21.1% of the sample. The study suggests that parental engagement plays a significant role, even for adolescent students. Children from African American families stated that their parents had higher aspirations for them than did Latino American and Caucasian adolescents. Spera (2006) stated that these findings support the view that African American parents prioritize educational attainment as one way to ensure a successful future for their children. Conversely, Bean, Bush, McKenry, and Wilson (2003) found a different level of parent influence on student academic achievement. Unlike the

other studies on parental engagement thus far reviewed, this study indicated that for African American youth, “peer influences play a stronger role than parenting behaviors in predicting academic achievement among African American adolescents” (p. 535). The participants in this study consisted of 75 African American and 80 European American adolescents selected from a larger United States sample of 556 adolescents from six public high schools in the Midwest. The study did not identify the socioeconomic status of the participants, but did specify the family structure, education of the family, and the two ethnic groups of European American and African American as measuring factors. European American fathers were more formally educated than the African American fathers, and African American fathers had a greater percentage (65%) of children living in a household without two parents than did the European American fathers (50%). The absence of African American fathers has more serious educational consequences for black youth than for white youth (Jeynes, 2015). Although Bean et al. (2003) reported peers having a stronger role in predicting academic achievement among African American adolescents, their findings also noted that maternal support related significantly to academic achievement.

African American student achievement by gender has a significant role in parent involvement for the African American family. In general, African American girls do perform better in school than boys. Additionally, African American girls are less likely to drop out of high school before graduating than African American boys (National Center for Education Statistics: NCES, 2014a). Similarly, African American girls between the ages of 18 and 24 are also more likely to be enrolled in college as compared to African American boys (NCES, 2014b).

Benefits of Parent Engagement

Studies have produced positive empirical evidence suggesting that parental involvement in children's education is strongly associated with student achievement (Fields-Smith, 2005). Henderson and Mapp (2002) maintain that:

The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life. This fourth edition of Evidence confirms that the research continues to grow and build an ever-strengthening case. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more (p. 7).

Many studies revealed that students with involved parents, regardless of income or background, were more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs, be promoted, pass their classes and earn credits, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior and adapt well to school, and graduate and go on to postsecondary education.

Benefits of parent engagement for students.

The first area of benefit to students is in school discipline and behavior. Sheldon and Epstein (2002) employed a quantitative, two-part survey at 47 schools in a range of socioeconomic levels and regional areas, and found that with increased family and community involvement, regardless of prior rates of discipline, the number of office visits, detentions, and suspensions decreased. The most effective involvements were parenting skills and consistent volunteering at the school. While discipline and structure are essential for teaching and learning to be consistent and effective, more research has focused directly on how parent involvement can increase academic achievement among urban students (Jeynes, 2005).

Some studies have shown that parental involvement is integral to student academic success regardless of economic, racial, or cultural background (Jeynes, 2005). Teachers

benefit when parents share their knowledge of their children's strengths, needs, experiences and problems, so that appropriate social and academic programs can be implemented in the classroom (Henderson et al., 2007; Jeynes, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). This is especially important for urban students from low-income families who have the most to gain if school communities work for greater and more meaningful parent involvement (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Equity in schools can be built only through the school's work with parents (Ferguson, 2005). Especially in low-income, urban schools where enrollment is marked by diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, administrators and teachers need to work towards culturally relevant teaching, or connecting curriculum to students' home lives to keep students engaged and enrolled, especially at the middle school level.

Westat (as cited in Wherry, 2010) stated that "in schools where teachers reported high levels of 'outreach' to the parents of low achieving students, reading and math test scores grew at a rate 40% higher than in schools where teachers reported low levels of outreach" (p. 3). The Westat study also indicated that when fathers are involved, children do better in school. In a similar article examining parent involvement by fathers, Tobias (2009) reported that fathers play a vital role in the positive school experiences of children. In 2009, the National Center for Fathering and the National Parent Teacher Association reported:

double digit gains from 1999 to 2009 in the percentage of dads involved in some aspects of their children's education. The number of dads who walk or drive their child to school, for example, was up 16 percentage points from 1999. The number of dads attending school-based parent meetings increased. The number of dads who attended class events or visited their child's classrooms was up 11 percentage points. The largest gain was in the number of fathers who meet regularly with other dads for support-up 20 percentage points since 1999. More fathers are going to churches, schools, community centers or even the local coffee shops to get together and talk about their kids and about being dad (p. 1).

Bodnar (2009) supported this view by suggesting that when a father is involved with his child's education, the mother will be able to do other things, such as volunteer. A father being involved in a child's education also indicates that the father is involved in the child's life, an important factor in itself. Bodnar (2009) further suggested that students perform better when they have their father as well as their mother involved, even if they do not live together.

Carey (2004) maintained that parent involvement in middle school academics and other activities is more important now than ever before, because research suggests that parental involvement of any kind results in benefits to both the school and the child, with higher grades, higher standardized test scores, higher graduation rates, a greater likelihood of the child attending college, and a more positive attitude from the child. These results are consistent regardless of the parents' own educational achievements, ethnic background, cultural or language challenges, and socioeconomic status.

When parents are appropriately involved, children's academic achievement improves and other beneficial outcomes result, such as regular attendance, good behavior, and improved teacher efficacy (Epstein, 2001). Research has shown that parent involvement has a significant influence on student achievement (Barnard, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001). Additionally, students in secondary schools earn higher grades in English and math, attain better reading and writing skills, have better attendance, and exhibit fewer behavior problems when parents are involved (Epstein, 2008). "Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has found that parent levels of education and parent involvement have a significant influence on student achievement" (Howard & Reynolds, 2008, p. 83). The NAEP data report a 30 scale point differential on standardized

achievement tests between students with involved parents and students whose parents were not involved (Dietel, 2006). Aside from the NAEP data, two major sets of models have been proposed to identify the benefits of parent involvement.

Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) theorize that “in the skill development models, parents’ involvement in children’s academic lives improves children’s achievement because of the skill-related resources it provides children” (p. 376). Pomerantz et al. defined skill-related resources as “cognitive skills, such as receptive language capability and phonological awareness, as well as metacognitive skills, such as planning, monitoring, and regulating the learning process” (p. 376). The researchers asserted that when parents are involved in children’s academic lives, they may gain useful information about how and what children are learning in school, and accurate information about children’s abilities (Pomerantz et al., 2007).

In the motivational model, “the central idea is that parents’ involvement enhances children’s achievement because it provides children with a variety of motivational resources that foster children’s engagement in school” (Pomerantz et al., 2007, p. 376). The researchers asserted that when parents are involved in their children’s academic lives, they highlight the value of school and provide their children with active strategies for dealing with school and the challenges it presents (Pomerantz et al., 2007). It is likely that parents’ involvement in children’s schooling enhances children’s achievement through both skill and motivational development.

Parent involvement related to African American educational outcomes has emerged as one of the most discussed topics in educational circles today. Using the 1992 National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) data set on the effects of parental involvement on

the academic achievement of African American 12th grade youth, Jeynes (2005) found that parent involvement is beneficial in student achievement. The results indicated that “having highly involved parents contributes as a predictor to the academic outcomes for African American senior students” (p. 264). African American students with highly involved parents had an advantage over those whose parents were less involved. The average difference in the scores was 4.08 points, with the smallest difference seen in the Reading test and the largest difference in Social Studies (Jeynes, 2005).

Benefits of parent engagement for parents.

Parent involvement in schools has been shown to result in positive changes among parents (Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004). Parental benefits include an increased sense of self-efficacy, increased understanding of the school’s program, more motivation to continue their own education, and greater appreciation for the role they play in their child’s education (Plevyak, 2003; Wherry, 2003). Parental involvement is beneficial to families because it improves parent-teacher relationships and increases parent self-confidence in helping children succeed in school (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Additionally, parent involvement promotes a positive experience for parents, who feel encouraged to build their own self-image and their parenting skills (Epstein, 1995; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Collaboratively, parents benefit from other parents with similar ideas by being engaged in school. Parents gain an awareness of the community resources available to them. Parents benefit from volunteering because it brings “awareness that parents are welcome and valued at school” (Epstein, 1995, p. 729).

Benefits of parent engagement for schools.

The school also benefits by actively involving parents and the community; schools tend to establish better reputations in the community and experience better community support. Schools that encourage and involve parents usually have higher quality programs than schools that do not involve parents. Parent involvement is not a luxury; it is an integral component of student achievement and school reform. Decades of research studies on the effect of meaningful parent involvement programs in schools have shown that when parents are involved, students achieve more, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' education level. When parents are involved, students exhibit more positive attitudes and behavior. Children from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to do better when parents and professionals collaborate to bridge the gap between the culture at home and the culture at the learning institution. Schools that work well with families have better teacher morale and higher ratings of teachers by parents. Additionally, school programs that involve parents outperform identical programs without parent and family involvement.

In a comprehensive school reform and school improvement study in Sacramento, California, teachers were trained to conduct home-school visits for students who were scheduled to be in their classes that year. During the first visit, teachers focused on building a trusting relationship with the parents. Eventually, as the visits continued, teachers discussed ways that parents could be supportive of education at home. The schools involved in the study showed a decrease in discipline problems, an increase in student daily attendance, and improvement in academic achievement. An additional benefit for schools when parents are involved is that a positive atmosphere and culture are recognized by the community, which is likely to increase the number of resources offered by the community

(Epstein, 1995). When parents are involved, teachers develop an understanding of the families and the children, such as the child's cultural background and parents' expectations, concerns, and goals for their children (Hill & Taylor, 2004). This understanding also allows for increased positive and open communication for teachers when working with diverse parent groups (Epstein, 1995).

Barriers to Parental Engagement

Although parental involvement has been shown to positively affect student achievement, reduce problem behaviors, and create a positive sense of self-efficacy for achieving in school, parental involvement tends to decline in secondary schools (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007). Various factors influence the level of parental involvement. Parental involvement during adolescence decreases due to a lack of social networks for parents and a lack of financial stability (Sheldon, 2003). Parents identified other barriers that prevent them from being more involved in their child's education, including inconvenient meeting times, transportation, child care, communication from the school, and knowledge of school rules and policies (Johnson, Pugach, & Hawkins, 2004).

Galassi and Griffin (2010) stated, "parents' perceptions regarding life context variables (skills and knowledge, and time and energy) also influence how and if parents are involved in the school" (p. 88). Parents may be motivated to be involved in school activities if they perceive that they have the skills and knowledge to be effective and helpful, whereas parents' perceptions about the demands on their time and energy (e.g., work and family responsibilities) facilitate or hinder their level of involvement (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). Brandon and Brown (2009) state that "the lack of involvement by African American parents and families may be due to parental alienation from the school

in terms of feeling out of place, experiencing real or perceived discrimination, or having a sense of estrangement when interacting with educators” (p. 86). School personnel may have the misconception that African American parents are apathetic, disinterested, or indifferent to their child’s education and may not work to encourage these parents to participate in school (Bloom, 2001). Similarly, “teachers often perceive African American parents as uninvolved and disinterested in their children’s education” (Fields-Smith, 2005, p. 130). Conversely, these parents may feel as if they don’t have anything to offer the school (Thompson, 2003b).

Brandon (2007) identified nine factors that erect barriers to parent participation: (a) cultural and/or linguistic diversity, (b) economics, (c) family composition, (d) parent educational level, (e) school-home communication, (f) parent-teacher interaction, (g) school-parent interaction, (h) success of the child in school, and (i) personal constraints (e.g., lack of time, lack of transportation, lack of child care). The interaction of these barriers can be complex and may create a cycle of noninvolvement where parents retreat and educators do not engage the parents (Brandon, 2007). Similarly, a recent study of primarily African American middle school parents found that parents’ demanding work schedules and lack of paid leave prevented them from participating in school activities (Murray et al., 2014)

Parents commented on the negative stereotypes that many teachers had of African American students, and how these negative perceptions influenced the interactions between African American students and their teachers. African American are less likely to engage in equitable partnerships when they perceive that the school does not welcome parent involvement. The perceptions of invitations from schools to be involved are important in promoting the participation of low-income and minority families (Marinez-Lora & Quintana, 2009; Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & McRoy, 2014). Additionally, the perceptions of a

negative school climate to include discipline and safety problems and ineffective leadership can reduce parents' desire to spend time at the school (Murray et al., 2014).

Parents stated that "increased involvement could dispel many of the myths that exist regarding African American students and their families (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008, p. 150). Parents' viewpoints on the barriers to parental involvement echoed what researchers have asserted. Parental involvement is crucial to children's successful educational experiences at all grade levels (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006). However, Park and Bauer (2002) suggest that parents have to learn to be engaged in their children's educational experiences regardless of ethnicity.

The complexity of family arrangements today and the vast socio-economic and cultural differences among classroom teachers, children, and families further prevent positive relationships from forming. Factors that prohibit urban parents from engagement with their child's school may include: language barriers, lack of transportation to and from the school, lack of childcare for siblings at home, personal negative associations with school, and feelings of inadequacy in the content areas (Norton & Nufeld, 2002). When schools do not consider parents' needs, low-income parents often feel removed from the school and begin to develop a competing rather than complementary mentality (Hoover-Dempsey, 1997). Schools can provide alternative means of communication to provide urban parents with more frequent and effective dialogue regarding their children's education to make the parents feel accepted (Hoover- Dempsey, 1997). Issues around authentic communication and meaningful partnerships happen throughout a child's schooling, from early childhood through high school. However, schools that do not reach out to parents can be most detrimental for urban families whose children begin school with disadvantages.

Difficulties begin due to disparities between school and home environments. During early childhood education, the issue of school readiness begins with disparities in the knowledge with which students arrive at school, and the learning gaps only continue to increase as children get older (Ferguson, 2005). Potential contributions to school readiness that can be missing in low-income, urban homes are:

nurturance (expressions of love, affection and care), discipline (responses to behaviors that parents regard as inappropriate), teaching (strategies for transmitting information or skills to the child), language (the amounts and characteristics of verbal communication with the child), and materials (books, recordings and other materials to support learning) (Ferguson, p. 9).

As a result of these limitations, minority, low-income, urban students may begin school behind their peers on many levels. However, Jeynes (2005) found that the most important influences in urban settings on student success were parental styles and expectations. The findings indicate that if parents are successful in providing emotionally stable and stimulating environments at home, the lack of financial resources and educational levels is minimized (Davis-Kean, 2005). This suggests that there exist more subtle ways in which parents influence their children than the more direct factors such as their level of income, their years of schooling, or their ability to directly engage in students' academic work. Finally, parents may have their own personal negative histories associated with schools, teachers, and administrators in general, rather than with the particular school at which their child is enrolled (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). These personal biographies may cloud parents' ability to set aside their own issues, shortcomings, or negative experiences with schools from their child's current experiences, preventing parents from attending school events or communicating more regularly. This barrier may be overcome when teachers communicate

regularly with parents and provide positive, constructive feedback that reflects individual knowledge of the students' abilities (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

Koonce and Harper (2005) discussed the barriers that African American parents face when they try to collaborate with schools. They reported that parents felt unwelcome in their children's school and that the teachers related to them with hostility. The authors commented that some schools are resistant to implementing programs to increase parental involvement, which complicates the problem of institutionalizing parent participation. If parents do not feel welcome in the school building, the probability that they will ask for or provide help for their children is small.

Some parents themselves have had negative personal experiences in school that cause them to be reluctant to come into school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). If they feel uncertain about how to do the math, uncomfortable being in the building because of past negative experiences with school personnel, or have experienced hostility expressed by school staff, parents will probably not want to come into the school facilities. Smalley and Reyes-Blanes (2001) suggested that actively involving African American parents in their children's education remains one of society's greatest challenges. The study suggested non-traditional methods of involving parents, such as training them away from the school setting. Fields-Smith (2005) suggested that educators must consider alternate, less visible ways for parents to be involved in their children's schooling. Lewis, et al. (2008) said that educational leaders must be willing to put aside traditional and passive approaches to parental involvement and look for models informed by best practices. These researchers offered a suggestion of teachers visiting the home instead of parents coming to the school site.

While there are many reasons for parents to visit schools, there are probably just as many reasons why parents do not visit schools. They may feel unable to negotiate the system; they may be less educated and may feel intimidated by the school environment, or they may feel socially out of place (Molland, 2004). These barriers often outweigh the widely publicized benefits of educational involvement, and exacerbate weak home-school connections between African American parents and schools (Thompson, 2003b). Because of these barriers, parents become more disenfranchised from the educational system. Henderson and Mapp (2002) argued that the way in which parents perceive school invitations, demands, and opportunities for parent involvement are key factors that influence parent involvement.

According to Bodnar (2009), research supports strong parental involvement as a key to student success. Yet there are factors that determine which parents will be capable and eager to participate in their child's education. While the research shows that there are economic and demographic issues that tend to affect parental participation levels, it is still important for schools to work on motivating all parents. Many parents are not sure how to get involved and many have had parents who were not involved in their education. Once they know the importance of participating, and what they can do, they will be more likely to take an active role (Bodnar, 2009).

The National Center for School Engagement (2010) reported that it is advisable for education systems to promote and support parental and family involvement and invest in activities and strategies that foster parent and school collaboration. The article also noted that there is some resistance and hesitation associated with allocating resources to promote parent involvement in schools because both school personnel and parents may be

uncomfortable with the concept. Martinez (2004) cited four common barriers associated with parent involvement in schools and community programs. They are:

- Attitudes: Staff does not feel comfortable talking about issues in front of families, and families do not trust staff. Staff thinks families are too overwhelmed to participate and staff is not willing to accept families as equal partners. Families think they have nothing to contribute, while staff thinks that families will violate client confidentiality.
- Logistics: Schools and programs cannot pay for childcare. Transportation is unavailable for families to get to meetings. Meetings are held only during working hours – or at times inconvenient for parents. Families are not reimbursed for the time they take off of work to attend meetings.
- System barriers: No systems are in place for paying parent leaders for their time and contributions. Staff time can only be paid during regular working hours.
- Lack of skills; families have not participated in school meetings/committees. Families are unaware of applicable procedures and policies and staff is not ready to work with families in new ways. (p. 1).

Barriers to parent engagement take many forms. Wherry (2010) contends that the most common barriers are:

Parents who believe they do not have the ability to help their child do better in school. Parents who do not feel that the school invites, welcomes, or encourages their involvement. Schools that fail to alert parents as soon as children begin to have problems. Lack of true, two-way, respectful partnership communication between parents and school personnel. Parents who feel intimidated by the school - and teachers and other school staff who feel intimidated by parents (p. 1).

Wherry also suggests that, “The answer is to stop treating parents like ‘clients’ and start treating them like ‘partners’ in helping children learn” (p.1). He also advised that identifying barriers to parent involvement and making plans to overcome them can help ensure that next year will be successful.

The National PTA/Building Successful Partnerships (2010) outlined what they believe are the most common barriers and ways to overcome them. The National PTA referred to barriers as roadblocks and corrective actions as detours. The barrier of time presented

roadblocks for parents. Parents often cited time as the single greatest barrier to volunteering, attending meetings, and joining decision-making committees at their children's schools. These activities often are scheduled at times that interfere with work or other obligations. The recommendation to address this issue was that schools be flexible in scheduling meetings and events, and also try a mix of mornings, evenings, and weekends to allow every parent the opportunity to attend. Meetings could be held at community centers, apartment buildings, church halls, parks, libraries, and the workplace to make it easier for parents to attend.

Parents not feeling valued was cited as another barrier to establishing a partnership with schools (National PTA/Building Successful Partnerships, 2010). Some parents indicated that they felt as if they had nothing of value to contribute. Additionally, they may feel intimidated by principals, teachers, and PTA leaders and may also have had unpleasant school experiences or may have limited education or low literacy levels. Educators and administrators can reinforce these feelings if they consider uninvolved parents lacking in certain qualities or deficient in some way. To address these issues, school personnel can extend a personal welcome to parents who appear to be withdrawn or uncomfortable, and establish regular communication to build relationships with parents based on mutual respect and trust. These relationships can reveal what is going on at home that may impact a parent's ability to participate in school activities, such as dealing with a family illness, an aging parent, or financial stress. Mutual benefit can be gained by leveraging parents' interests and abilities, actively seeking opportunities at home or at school for parents to use their experience and talents to benefit the school in some way, and by valuing their contributions. For parents with low literacy levels, schools can make phone calls and home visits, provide

video messages, and work with local libraries to form literacy groups and provide adult literacy and English Language Learners programs.

Parents feeling unwelcome in the school was cited as a barrier, according to the National PTA/Building Successful Partnerships (2010). Parents may feel they are unwelcome in the school because of staff interactions, attitudes, and the physical appearance of some schools that may convey an unwelcoming environment. National PTA/Building Successful Partnership (2010) suggested that schools provide professional development to help faculty and staff develop an awareness of the importance of parent involvement, and to acquire the knowledge and skills to successfully interact with parents. Staff should communicate to parents that they are welcome to visit during the school day and that protocols such as visitors' passes are in place for security reasons, not to make parents feel unwelcome. Schools should also post welcome signs at each entrance and on each classroom door in all languages spoken at the school, and create a space in the school that is designated especially for parents.

Some parents believe they have talents but don't know whether those talents are needed, or how to employ them at the school or with the PTA. Schools can resolve this issue by seeking parents' assistance rather than waiting for them to offer. To encourage positive parent involvement, teachers and administrators could create a list of desired qualities and contributions and hold a parent meeting or conduct a survey to determine what kinds of teacher support and school policies parents think are needed. Faculty and parents could share their lists and begin to discuss and form realistic expectations to more effectively use parents' many talents

Parents not understanding the school system was considered a barrier. Many parents are unfamiliar with the school system and do not know what their rights are or how they can become involved. In addressing this issue, schools should create a parent handbook covering rules, procedures, policies, and where to find answers to questions. The handbook should include names and numbers of contact people who can answer questions in specific areas, as well as names and photographs of school administrators, staff, teachers, and PTA officers.

Parents without adequate resources often feel overwhelmed. Families suffering from economic stress must address their needs for food, clothing, and shelter before they can become more involved in their children's education, according to the National PTA/Building Successful Partnerships (2010). To address this issue, schools should provide information to help parents access and secure the health care and social services they need for themselves and their families. Schools can work out agreements with social and health agencies to provide services at the school through school-based clinics, or near the school in community-based clinics. Schools can also develop and distribute a directory containing information on available services and resources in the community and how to access them. Once families' personal needs are met, schools can help parents become involved in the education of their children.

Often, parents are in need of childcare to attend school functions and meetings, where childcare may not be offered. At the same time, parents may be discouraged from bringing their children to events. To provide help in this area, schools can provide a room for childcare at the meeting site. Ask PTA members, community members, school service clubs, or other parents to volunteer to provide childcare on a rotating basis. Hire high school or

college students in child development classes or child-care professionals in the community to provide childcare.

While many barriers related to managerial and procedural processes cause parents to avoid engaging in their child's education, the lack of understanding of cultural diversity presents schools with another level of challenges. According to the National PTA/Building Successful Partnerships (2010), schools should review existing research and learn about families' cultural and social values and expectations regarding school systems. Developing a better understanding of diverse cultures can remove misconceptions and stereotypes and make schools more sensitive to families' needs. Schools can show respect for different cultures by planning events that do not conflict with religious and cultural holidays. Also, schools can include ethnic community leaders in school improvement efforts and recruit, train, and hire bilingual parents to be paraprofessionals and liaisons to families. Any outreach provided to diverse families should focus on the whole family and not just individual members.

Wherry (2010) discussed time, financial resources, and miscommunication/distrust as three common barriers that impact parent involvement. He explained that supporting children in their education can be difficult for working parents, especially for single parents. He noted that nontraditional work hours deprive parents of opportunities to participate at school and at home. He also maintained that parents with low paying jobs often have to work longer hours, reducing time and energy for family and school activities. Being absent from work can cost parents their jobs. Many families cannot provide technologies that match those in the classroom, and some parents have transportation challenges. Wherry (2010) cited poor communication between schools and parents as a cause of mutual mistrust. His

concern was that families who are contacted only when students have trouble are less likely to believe that staff members are acting in their child's best interests. Parents may feel that their efforts and circumstances are ignored, resulting in stereotyping by both parties.

The mistrust between parents and school is often attributed to the African American parent perceptions about White teachers. Murray (2012) indicated that the relationship between African American parents and teachers is complicated because African American parents may have the perceptions that White teachers have lower standards for their children. This perceived attitude towards African American parents and students may imply that White have more of a focus on student behavior and less on academic achievement (Murray, 2012). Murray also asserted that African American parents engaged less with schools because school staff only reached out to them because of behavior concerns. In more recent literature, more African American parents are advocating for their male children because their son's are reportedly seen by some teachers as being dangerous, a social problem and unteachable (Rowley et al., 2014).

Urban School Barriers

Issues of involvement are exacerbated as children get older and parents become less involved. Parents withdraw for several reasons: they want to build their children's ability to be independent, middle schools tend to reach out to parents less frequently, and parents become more resistant to involvement due to a lack of understanding of the curriculum. Studies in high schools have shown that despite a student's increased age or a parent's desire to teach independence, communicating common expectations and bridging relationships between parents and teachers creates the most positive outcomes for students (Clark, Shreve, & Stone, 2004). Because of more demanding academic and social factors, higher levels of

schooling intensify issues for students. Rather than granting their children more independence, parents may need to provide more support. The most important factor for students who grew up in poverty and succeeded despite hardships is that they had caring adults in their lives as role models, whether it was a teacher, a counselor, or a coach. These students are successful when there is community involvement and extended services to families outside of school hours. In addition, there must be collaboration among all these adults to ensure student success. Parent involvement is most successful when school expectations match parent aspirations and values, for united messages to students from all adults in their life regarding their education (Clark, Shreve, & Stone, 2004).

Urban Leadership Barriers

Schools, Colleges, and Departments of Education of the United States indicated that there was an equal understanding that school administrators, as well as teachers, need training in order to lead schools, set the tone, and be creative in whole school practices (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Administrators in urban districts are inundated with the task of meeting state standards and raising scores on standardized tests to avoid punitive action by the federal government. Therefore, programs and partnerships, which take significant amounts of time and energy, often get lost in daily priorities. However, it is the responsibility of schools, led by their principals, to find ways to expand the roles of parents so they feel empowered to work in partnership with teachers, rather than in conflict and tension (Fullan, 2003). This change might occur through principals changing the cultural context in which their schools operate. When leaders change context, they change behaviors. Adjusted norms of behavior lead to a school culture that is based on high standards for everyone and on common, rather than individual, goals (Fullan, 2003). The ultimate goal of

raising achievement through a focus on students should be the unifying factor for parents and school personnel (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). This priority is set by the leader to mobilize and lead the whole school community.

Changing the context of the school to engage and empower parents requires that urban leaders give up some of their control over school decisions. Instead, urban school leaders may shift toward building the capacity of multiple stakeholders invested in student success in order to promote collaborative leadership. Decker, Decker, and Brown (2007) contended that leadership must identify and utilize people with varying strengths in the community, bring them together for the specific purpose of engaging the whole school community in raising student achievement, and keep them focused on this goal. It also requires a leader who can help the group to view conflict as an opportunity for growth. The school leader's willingness and ability to engage in this difficult work is essential to its success. With the ever-increasing demands on school leaders, especially those in an urban environment, this commitment is difficult, but should not be regarded as an additional duty; rather, it is an organic, integral piece of their daily work (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007).

School Strategies to Improve Parent Involvement

The literature describes many ways in which schools and teachers can influence parental involvement and improve the relationship between parents and the school (Sheldon, 2003). If teachers encourage parents, parents are more likely to get involved, including the hard to reach parents (Sheldon, 2003). Open communication between parents and teachers can benefit the academic success of students (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane (2007) studied the types of parent involvement that teachers, parents, and students believe affect the academic achievement of adolescent learners. Their research

revealed that “The goal of schools should be to persuade parents to participate in the activities that schools identify as important to the degree that teachers and students begin to notice a difference” (DePlanty et al., 2007, p. 367). DePlanty et al. note that the goal could be achieved through several means: (a) workshops provided by the community or school focusing on the benefits of parent involvement and those parent behaviors that are most important, (b) brochures or pamphlets sent home informing parents about parent involvement, and (c) talks with parents about involvement during parent-teacher conferences. Findings from the Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2008) study indicated that middle schools could increase African American parental involvement through several means: (a) set higher expectations for African American students, (b) establish flexible meeting locations, (c) offer workshops for homework help at home, and (d) create cultures that believe that parents care. “Creating higher expectations for African American students may motivate more African American parents to be involved in their children’s schooling” (DePlanty et al., 2008, p. 152). A sincere commitment by middle school personnel to include African American parents in various aspects of their children’s education will create a more trusting relationship between both groups (Epstein, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). Parents repeatedly commented on the inability of many low-income African American parents to actively participate in their children’s middle school experiences (Jeynes, 2002). Strategies aimed at offering parents some flexibility in becoming involved could lead to increased involvement. Community based meetings and activities could reduce the need for low-income parents to seek transportation to attend school-related functions, because they would be closer to where they live (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008).

The literature shows that there are many benefits for schools and students when parents are actively engaged in their child's education; however, numerous barriers prevent parents from engaging at the level school personnel and parents expect. More information is needed to determine how parents and administrators perceive their roles in increasing the level of parent engagement to support the academic achievement of students.

Conclusion

The reviewed literature supported parent engagement as a vital factor in the educational achievement of students, especially African American students. The authors emphasized the importance of families, community groups, and educators in student success. Researchers examined how parents, teachers, and administrators can implement effective parental engagement in schools. Traditional types of involvement were discussed, such as volunteering at school, attending school functions, and helping with homework. In addition, researchers concluded that parents, teachers, and administrators are at the core of the process for student success. As this study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of African American parents' role in student achievement, the literature was conclusive that effective implementation of parent involvement programs and strategies help determine the achievement levels of African American students.

In this study, the researcher explored urban African American parents' perspectives of their role in student achievement in Project L.I.F.T., an urban school district learning community that has a specific focus on parent engagement. The researcher studied how parents perceive their roles in their children's educational experiences. The findings from this study provided further clarity on how and why Project L.I.F.T. engages African American parents. Parental beliefs about their roles, the school's role and the school's

perspective of parents' roles and the school's role will build on the role construct literature for parent engagement.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore urban African American parents' perspectives regarding their role in student achievement. Qualitative research provided a contextual understanding of how parents perceive their roles in their children's educational experiences. Equally important to this study was the notion of parents as decision makers (Epstein, 2009). The researcher used case study design to study parent engagement and student achievement. This chapter described the research methods used to explore the perspectives of urban African American parents in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community regarding their role in student achievement.

Qualitative Methods

Patton (2002) defines qualitative research as an attempt to understand unique interactions in a particular situation. The purpose of understanding is not to predict what may occur, but to understand in detail the characteristics of the situation and the meaning brought by the participants and what is happening to them at the moment. The aim of qualitative research is to present legitimate findings to others who are interested in the subject matter. The key to understanding this study is the idea that parental engagement is socially constructed by how and why parents interact with the school. The school, world, or reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon. Instead, there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and change over time

(Patton, 2002). Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding what those interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context. Researchers employing the interpretive, qualitative approach seek to understand and describe how respondents experience their social worlds. Merriam (2002) discusses the interpretive approach as:

several key characteristics cut across the various interpretive qualitative research designs (also called forms, types, or genres by various authors). The first characteristic is that researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences; that is, how do people make sense of their experiences?" (p.4).

Merriam (2002) suggests that the researcher must be the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. The human instrument adds greater understanding and interpretation because of the ability to probe, clarify, and factor in nonverbal communication. Merriam also cautions that humans have biases and subjectivities that may arise and that should be addressed as part of the study. Lastly, the qualitative product should be "richly descriptive" (Merriam, 2002, p.5), encompassing accounts of the participants, the setting, quotations, excerpts from interviews, and other relevant data that provide a vivid description.

A critical aspect of qualitative research is demonstrating respect for the respondents in the study. Noblit (1999) suggests that there are four commitments involved in qualitative research: (a) to people, (b) to understanding, (c) to learning, and (d) to advocating. A qualitative study is more than obtaining provocative data from the participants; it is also applying the data in a manner which is useful for the participants. In this study, the commitment was to the African American parents of urban students and how the data they provided would be beneficial for them and their schools. The data would also benefit the

leaders of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and Project L.I.F.T., by providing insight into how to increase the level of parent engagement in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community.

Tillman (2002) notes that cultural experiences and knowledge of study participants may be used in the research design, in the collection of data, and in the interpretation of data. In Tillman's approach to culturally sensitive research, she notes that the researcher should (a) present a holistic and contextualized picture of the social, political, economic, and educational factors that impact the lives of African Americans; (b) remain committed to maintaining the cultural integrity of the participants and members of the community; (c) make an attempt to reveal, understand, and respond to the unequal power structures that work to exclude African Americans; (d) view experiential knowledge as legitimate for analyzing, understanding, and reporting data; and (e) lead to theories and practices that address the culturally specific circumstances of African Americans (Tillman, 2002).

Additionally, Tillman (2006) suggests that commonalities between the researcher and the participants are important and substantial in culturally sensitive approaches to research about African Americans, allowing participants to express what is real in their lives.

"Culturally sensitive research approaches have the power to help researchers to capture more fully the successes and struggles of African Americans – that is, the totality of their experiences" (p. 266).

Case Study Methodology

The researcher conducted a qualitative, exploratory, intrinsic case study. Qualitative research occurs in the actual setting of the targeted participants (naturalistic) (Patton, 2002). Merriam (1998) describes case study design as a method used to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. In other words, a case study

allows the researcher to develop an in-depth description and analysis of the one single case or multiple cases which can provide insight or substantive information about an educational phenomenon.

Case study research is defined as that in which the researcher examines the details of an individual's life experiences through the "collection of stories, reporting of individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences for the individual" (Yin, 2009, p. 512). Case study research is also identified as research that entails learning about an issue examined through one or more cases – denoted as a single individual, several individuals, or individuals within a group, a program, an event, or an activity (Creswell, 2008). The case study involves an analysis of a bounded system. "Bounded means that the case is separated out for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries" (Creswell, 2008, p. 476). In this study, the case is defined by African American parent engagement in four of the nine schools in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina.

According to Yin (2009), case studies are the preferred method when "(a) 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, (b) the investigator has little control over events, and (c) the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon with a real life context" (Yin, 2009, p.2). This study focused on the following research questions:

1. What are Project L.I.F.T.'s African American parents' beliefs about their role in their child's academic achievement?
2. What are Project L.I.F.T.'s African American parents' beliefs about the school's role in their child's academic achievement?

3. How do Project L.I.F.T.'s African American parents partner with the school for their child's academic achievement?

4. How do Project L.I.F.T.'s school principals perceive the role of African American parents in student achievement?

Merriam (1998) describes case study research as a means of investigating complex social units. The research questions were exploratory, with the goal of determining the perspectives of African American parents in regard to how they engage in the school and how school principals view the role of parental engagement. Case study research was selected because, according to Yin:

Case study research is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident. The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there are many more variables of interest and data points and relies on multiple sources of evidence with data needing to converge in the triangulation fashion and benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (p. 81).

Triangulation of data collected from parents, school principals, and prior literature provided a rich, robust, comprehensive study of how African American parents engage in urban schools in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community.

Conceptual Framework

For this study, the researcher took an inductive approach, using the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) parental engagement framework model (see Figure 1) as a guide in developing a positive parent engagement model that illuminated the perceptions of African American parents and their role in student achievement. The researcher also sought to discover other ways in which African American parents of the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community engage in their schools and how the schools can support parental engagement.

This model is appropriate because it accentuates the perceptions of African American parents and explains some of the possible limiting factors that prohibit the engagement of parents. Additionally, the model defines ways in which African American parents engage in schools and how schools may support parental engagement for the benefit of students.

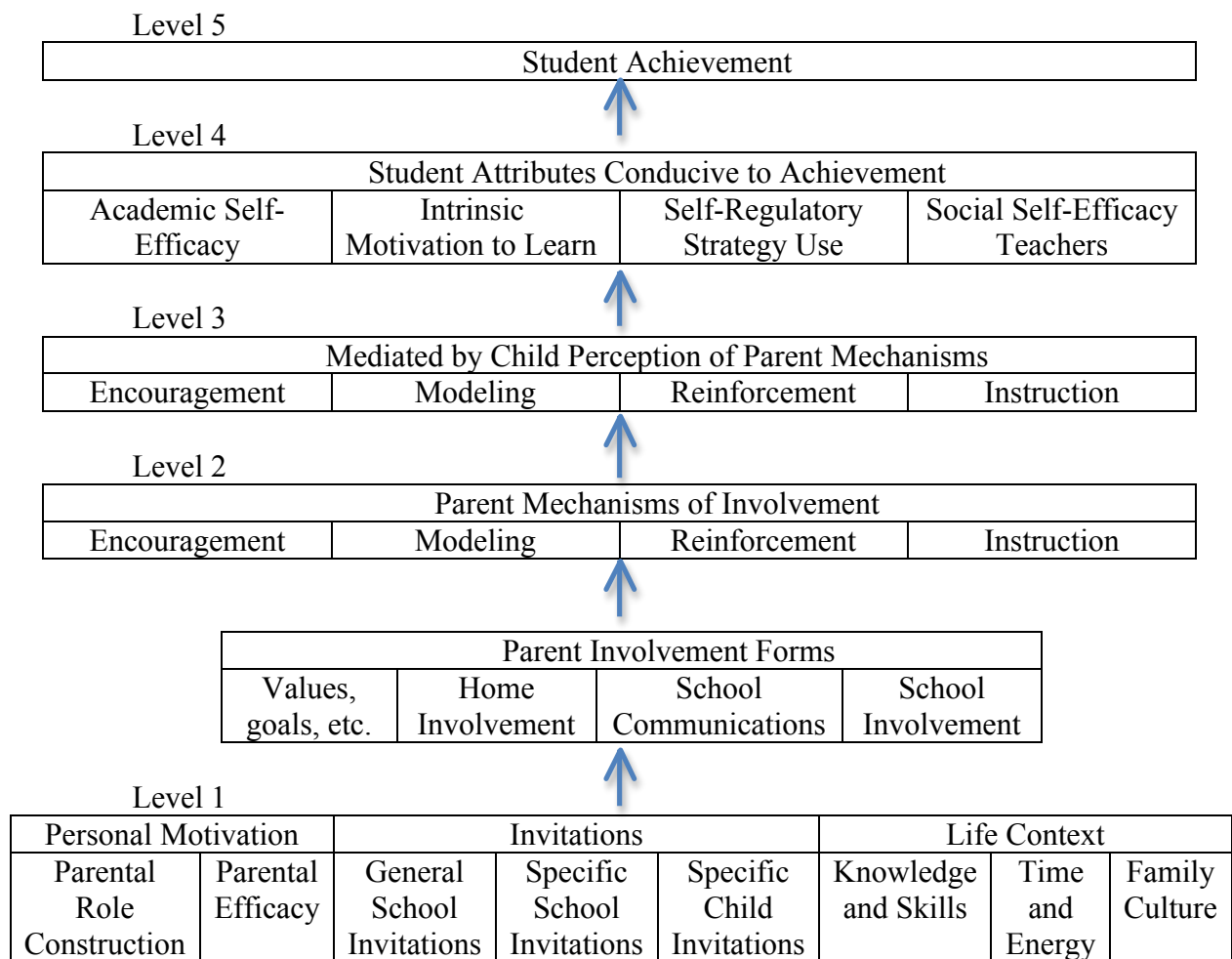


Figure 1. The Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler model of parental involvement. From “Parent Involvement: Model Revision through Scale Development.” By J. M. Walker, A. S. Wilkins, J. R. Dallaire, H. M. Sandler, and K. V. Hoover-Dempsey, 2005, *The Elementary Journal*, 1062(2), p. 86. Copyright 2007 by the Heldref Publications.

“The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) model of parent involvement is useful for its attention to parent perspectives and elaboration of the concept of parent role construction” (Auerbach, 2007, p. 255). The four-part model illustrates that parent role

construction is the key predictor in whether parents become actively engaged in their children's education (Auerbach, 2007). The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model is "highly generative, but calls for adaptation when applied to working-class parents of color" (Auerbach, 2007, p. 256). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) identified three constructs that influence parents' involvement in their children's education (Auerbach, 2007):

- Parents' perception of their role. Parents' notions about their parenting role impact their beliefs, which then guide their behavior around their children's education.
- Parents' sense of efficacy, which is pivotal to their sense of whether they are able to get involved in their child's education and whether their efforts to help and support will result in positive outcomes.
- Parents' perception of the invitations, demands, and opportunities for school involvement put forth both by their children and the school.

"Together, these three constructs form the basis of a parent's decision to get in the educational process" (Auerbach, 2007, p. 481). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) also claim that the expectations of the associations and groups to which parents belong may become recursive: "They influence the scope, level, and nature of parent involvement in children's schools" (Lawson, 2003, p. 81).

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) framework guided the coding of collected data. The actual perceptions of the parent participants informed the codes for the study. This method was used to collect authentic data that is specific to the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community.

Context of the Study and Site Selection

A critical component of case study research is sample selection. Merriam (1998) argues that the most appropriate sampling strategy for a qualitative study is purposeful sampling. A purposeful sampling, according to Patton (1990), is an information-rich case that will allow the researcher to maximize learning around the purpose of the study. Since time and availability to conduct fieldwork was limited, it was important to select a case that was easy to access and accommodating to collecting pertinent data. Merriam (1998) states, “purposeful sampling is based on the belief that the researcher wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61).

The researcher conducted an exploratory, intrinsic, single case study with the purpose of explaining how and why African American parents engage in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community. This was an intrinsic case study conducted in the Project Leadership and Innovation for Transformation (Project L.I.F.T.) Learning Community of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina. The study focused on one kindergarten through fifth grade school, two kindergarten through eighth grade schools, and one six through eighth grade school. Project L.I.F.T. has a focus on time, talent, technology, and community and parent engagement. This setting was relevant to the study because Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is an urban school district with a learning community of schools named Project L.I.F.T. that has a focus on engaging parents in the educational process for their children. Project L.I.F.T. has 7,183 students. African American students are the largest racial/ethnic group of the learning community making up 80% of the student population.

The racial/ethnic distribution of the remaining student population is: 2% Caucasian; 11% Hispanic/Latino; 5% Asian, and 2% Multiracial.

Participants

Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the researcher wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 1998). For this study, a purposeful sample of five to eight African American parents with students in kindergarten through eighth grade at the four selected Project L.I.F.T. schools were invited to participate in focus group discussions. Parent members of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) were also invited to participate in the focus groups and individual, semi-structured, follow-up interviews. The researcher also conducted individual interviews with the principals of the four schools in the study.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative research dictates identification of personal assumptions, biases, and values (Creswell, 1994). Personal biases are as varied as an individual's personal and professional identities. In this study, the researcher took the role of an indigenous insider, defined by Tillman (2006) as one who "endorses the unique values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge of his or her indigenous community and culture and is perceived by people within the community as a legitimate community member who can speak with authority about it" (p. 272).

The researcher is an African American male, an urban school principal, and a parent in the school district, traits which correlate with those of an indigenous insider. Because of these traits, the researcher's data analysis and conclusions were interpreted through the lens of the Hoover Dempsey and Sandler (2005) parent engagement framework to ensure validity

of the study. The use of the conceptual framework in the study removed the potential bias of the researcher as an indigenous insider. The researcher is an outsider, residing in a community other than where the research took place, and whose most recent employment experiences are not grounded in urban education. The researcher is a principal in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community, but does not hold a supervisory role in relation to any of the participants in this study. No participant in the study had any relationship to the school where the researcher serves as principal.

Access

Access to the parents from four schools in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina was negotiated through school administrators and central services support staff. School administrators at each of the four schools identified one to two parents who were involved in their children's education in any capacity (e.g., parent teacher association, parent nights, conferences, volunteers). The researcher conducted one focus group per school, for a total of four focus groups with five to eight parents invited to participate in each group. Principals of the selected schools were interviewed in a semi-structured interview process.

Interviews

According to Morse and Richards (2002) "the use of semi-structured interviews is appropriate when the researcher knows enough about the study topic to frame the needed discussion in advance" (p.94). Morse and Richards (2002) indicate that semi-structured interviews are characterized as open-ended questions that are developed in advance, along with prepared probes. The researcher electronically recorded all parent and principal interviews and then transcribed with the informed consent of the participants. Parent and

principal interviews took place on different dates, at different times, and at different locations. Furthermore, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to collect data from the principal participants. Each of the four principal interviews were 45 to 60 minutes in length. Focus group interviews were used to collect data from the parent participants in the study. Each of the four focus group interviews were 45 to 60 minutes in length.

In order to protect the identity of the participants, the researcher assigned a pseudonym to each parent and principal. All interviews were coded, and no names or identifying information were used other than the codes known to the researcher. The researcher studied the interviews to identify potential codes that emerged from the data using established literature regarding parental engagement (Yin, 2009). Some codes that emerged from the language of the participants was used, but the majority of the codes came from the established literature.

Analysis

Collected data were analyzed inductively by moving from a detailed data set to more conceptual codes and themes. The researcher reviewed data from the participant focus groups and interviews several times to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' beliefs, experiences, and perceptions. Follow-up interviews were conducted as needed to bridge gaps in the participant interviews and stories. "Analyzing qualitative data requires understanding how to make sense of text and images so that you can form answers to your research" (Creswell, 2008, p. 243). The researcher used Creswell's (2008) model of the qualitative process of data analysis that emphasizes a simultaneous and iterative process. Data were analyzed using Atlas.ti, a computer based software.

The researcher established codes to analyze the data. Creswell (2008) states, “There are no set guidelines for coding data” (p.251); however, the researcher used the following guidelines: (a) get a sense of the main ideas in the data, (b) choose an interview question and ask probing questions about what the participant is saying, (c) begin the process of coding, (d) make a list of all of the codes with definitions, (e) review the data with the codes to examine if any additional codes emerge, and (f) identify the interconnections of the codes to determine five to seven themes. This method allowed the researcher to use triangulation as a means of determining how the focus groups, parent interviews, principal interviews, and prior literature converged. Morse and Richards (2002) reported “all coding techniques have the purpose of allowing the researcher to simplify and focus on some specific characteristics of the data and all of them assist the researcher in abstracting or thinking up from the data” (p.111). The purpose of coding is linking rather than labeling, and it permits analytic thinking between data and ideas. Coding requires the researcher to reflect on and interpret the meaning of the data.

Trustworthiness

According to Maxwell (2005) triangulation is “collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings” (p.112). For this study, African American parents from various socioeconomic and educational backgrounds were interviewed in their individual settings. Maxwell (2005) also asserted that biases or sources of error that might exist must be considered, and ways to handle validity threats should be planned for as part of the study. Additionally, Maxwell asserted that threats to validity in qualitative analysis arise out of selecting data that fits preconceived beliefs. The potential for biases to influence this study

were considered and the researcher's personal and professional connections to this study were openly acknowledged.

In the analysis of the qualitative phase of the study, a peer researcher was consulted to strengthen trustworthiness. Each participant interview was transcribed, coded, and discussed with the peer reviewer before the researcher conducted the next interview. According to Creswell (2008) it is important for qualitative researchers to employ methods such as peer debriefing and to identify researcher bias in order to establish the trustworthiness of the study. Creswell added that research findings must be congruent with reality and must capture what is really there. Discussions and interpretations of the data were reviewed with a peer to determine whether the analysis accurately reflected what was present in the research data, and to allow the peer to provide comments and feedback.

Limitations

This study provided a general perspective of the perceptions of African American parents and their role in student achievement in an urban context. The details inherent in the study will be useful for others in urban education. The study is limited to one learning community in one urban school district. Four of the nine schools in the learning community were included in the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This chapter consists of the analysis and presentation of qualitative data from the study. The chapter is organized into four sections: a brief description of the purpose of the study, a brief description of the methodological approach, a description of the sample, and presentation of data and results.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine urban African American parents' perspectives regarding their role in student achievement in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community. Project L.I.F.T. has a focus on time, talent, technology, as well as community and parent engagement, which are referred to as the pillars in the learning community. The pillar of community and parent engagement focuses on engaging parents in the educational process for their children's academic achievement as defined by yearly growth on the North Carolina End of Grade and End of Course assessments, proficiency on the End of Grade and End of Course assessments and high school graduation rate. Project L.I.F.T. has 7,183 students. African American students are the largest racial/ethnic group of the learning community making up 80% of the student population. The racial/ethnic distribution of the remaining student population is: 2% Caucasian; 11% Hispanic/Latino; 5% Asian, and 2% Multiracial.

The case study research methods answered how and why African American parents engage with their children and their schools for the benefit of the child's academic

achievement. Because the focus of the study centered on the perceptions of African American parents, the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model was appropriate for this conceptual framework. “The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) model of parent involvement was useful because of its attention to parent perspectives and elaboration of the concept of parent role construction” (Auerbach, 2007, p. 255).

Methodological Approach

The researcher used case study design to gain insight into how and why parents engaged to support student achievement. This was a qualitative, exploratory, intrinsic case study. Qualitative research occurs in the actual setting of the targeted participants (naturalistic) (Patton, 2002). Merriam (1998) describes case study design as a method to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The study focused on the following research questions:

1. What are Project L.I.F.T.’s African American parents’ beliefs about their role in their child’s academic achievement?
2. What are Project L.I.F.T.’s African American parents’ beliefs about the school’s role in their child’s academic achievement?
3. How do Project L.I.F.T.’s African American parents partner with the school for their child’s academic achievement?
4. How do Project L.I.F.T.’s school principals perceive the role of African American parents in student achievement?

Focus group interviews from each of the four schools in the study were used to collect qualitative data from African American parents. Additional individual interviews were offered to parents who wanted to provide more information about how they engaged in their

child's education. Four principals participated in individual, semi-structured interviews that were 45-60 minutes in length.

The collected data from parents, principals, and prior literature were triangulated to provide a description of how and why African American parents in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community engaged to support the student achievement of their children. The collected parent data described the specific beliefs and actions of African American parents regarding their involvement in their children's education. The researcher collected data from principals to ascertain the beliefs and actions of the school in engaging African American parents. The perspectives of the principals were needed to determine the effectiveness of the schools' efforts to involve urban African American parents, according to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) parent involvement framework and prior literature.

Description of Sample

All of the parent participants in the study were African American, with students in grades ranging from elementary school to high school. Twenty-nine African American parents participated in the focus group interviews. Each participant had children to attend a school in which all students were provided meals at no cost. The four principal participants in the study all served in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community. All participants in the study have been assigned a pseudonym.

The schools in this studied are assigned pseudonyms and are described by the school's total student population, the school's growth status as measured by the North Carolina growth model and the school's achievement score and letter grade as defined by the North Carolina accountability model. According to North Carolina's growth model, schools are assigned a specific growth status rating which are one of the following: a) not met growth, b)

met growth or c) exceeded growth. In regards to school performance, each school is assigned an overall performance score and letter grade, a reading performance score and letter grade and a math performance score and letter grade. The grade range and letter grade correlations are as follows: grade performance score range of 85-100 has a letter grade of A; grade performance score range of 70-84 has a letter grade of B; grade performance score range of 55-69 has a letter grade of C; grade performance score range 40-54 has a letter grade of D; and grade performance score range of 0-40 has a letter grade of F. North Carolina's formula for determining the overall school's performance grade is 80% school achievement score. The school achievement score is calculated using a composite method based on the points earned by a school on all of the test measured for that school. The remaining 20% of the school performance grade is based on academic growth on the End of Grade assessment.

Eureka Middle School is a regular Title I middle school serving students in grades six through eight. Eureka has a partial International Baccalaureate magnet component which represents no more than 15% of the overall school's population. The total student population is 947 students. The racial/ethnic representation of Eureka is: 73% African American; 19% Hispanic; 3% White; 3% Asian; 2% Multi-racial and 1% American Indian. During the year of this study, Eureka Middle School exceeded its growth status as measured the North Carolina school growth model with a growth score of 92.5%. Eureka's school performance score was 53 with a school letter grade of D, the school's reading score was 53 with a reading letter grade of D and the school's math score was 39 with a math letter grade of F.

Willow PreK-8 is a Title I school. The total student population is 730 students. The racial/ethnic representation of the student population is: 72% African American; 12% Asian; 10% Hispanic; 3% White and 1% Multi-racial. During the year of this study, Willow

exceeded its growth status as measured the North Carolina school growth model with a growth score of 87.3%. Willow's school performance score was 45 with a school letter grade of D, the school's reading score was 39 with a reading letter grade of F and the school's math score was 40 with a math letter grade of D.

Great Valley PreK-8 is a Title I school. The total student population is 584 students. The racial/ethnic representation of the student population is: 89% African American; 6% Hispanic; 2% Asian; 2% White; 1% Multi-racial and 1% American Indian. During the year of this study, Great Valley exceeded its growth status as measured the North Carolina school growth model with a growth score of 88.9%. Great Valley's school performance score was 45 with a school letter grade of D, the school's reading score was 38 with a reading letter grade of F and the school's math score was 46 with a math letter grade of D.

Promise Elementary School is a regular Title I elementary school serving students in grades kindergarten through five. Promise Elementary has a partial International Baccalaureate magnet component which represents no more than 20% of the overall school's population. The total student population is 557 students. The racial/ethnic representation of the student population is: 81% African American; 11% Hispanic; 3% White; 2% Asian and 1% American Indian. During the year of this study, Promise Elementary School exceeded its growth status as measured the North Carolina school growth model with a growth score of 92.5%. Promise's school performance score was 65 with a school letter grade of C, the school's reading score was 52 with a reading letter grade of D and the school's math score was 68 with a math letter grade of C.

Table 1

Parent Focus Group Participants

Participants	Child's Grade Level(s)	Number of Years in School	School	School Letter Grade	School Grade Level(s)
S. Zimmerman	4	5	Willow	D	PreK-8
E. Woodward	1, 3	4	Willow	D	PreK-8
S. Harper	3	1	Willow	D	PreK-8
M. Watson	5, 8	5	Willow	D	PreK-8
J. Collins	5	3	Willow	D	PreK-8
L. Burke	4	2	Willow	D	PreK-8
P. Lowe	3	3	Great Valley	D	PreK-8
R. Armstrong	7	4	Great Valley	D	PreK-8
C. Fletcher	K, 3, 5	5	Great Valley	D	PreK-8
T. House	2	2	Great Valley	D	PreK-8
A. Owen	7	6	Great Valley	D	PreK-8
E. Newman	6	6	Great Valley	D	PreK-8
N. Dodson	3	4	Promise	C	K-5
S. O'Neal	5	6	Promise	C	K-5
T. Garner	2	2	Promise	C	K-5
F. Cooper	4, 12	5	Promise	C	K-5
J. Watson	4	5	Promise	C	K-5
K. Carlton	K	1	Promise	C	K-5
J. Lightfoot	1	2	Promise	C	K-5
L. Foster	6	1	Eureka	D	6-8
M. Brown	6	1	Eureka	D	6-8
J. Payne	6	1	Eureka	D	6-8
F. Watson	7	2	Eureka	D	6-8
O. Silvers	7	1	Eureka	D	6-8
D. Mason	7	2	Eureka	D	6-8
E. Shoop	8	3	Eureka	D	6-8

Principal participant one, Grayce Hainsworth, moved to Charlotte, North Carolina eight years ago to accept her first teaching position. The principal taught high school math for two years and then transitioned to become an instructional coach for a non-profit organization to support teachers across the school district. She then became a resident principal through the New Leaders for Tomorrow principal preparation program at a PreK-8 school, and served three years as assistant principal before being promoted to principal of her current school. She has served as principal for two years. She has served her last five years in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community.

Principal participant two, Thomasine Kenworthy, was a teacher prior to moving to Charlotte. In Charlotte, Ms. Kenworthy became an academic facilitator, assistant principal, and then principal. She has been employed with the school district for over 19 years at the elementary and middle school levels, and has been principal at her current school for six years. Her school has been in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community for five years.

Principal participant three, Catrina Doherty, taught for two and a half years at the middle grades level, and then served for a year at the central office level as an executive coordinator. She served as academic facilitator for two years and assistant principal for two years at the school where she is currently completing her first year as principal. She has been assigned to the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community for five years.

Principal participant four, Lanie Shepard, was an elementary classroom teacher. Later, she became a literacy facilitator for seven years at the elementary level. She was a dean of students for three years, an assistant principal for three years, and she is now in her fourth year as a principal. She has been assigned to the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community for

five years. The principal participants in the study have been assigned a pseudonym. In Table 2, the identifying pseudonyms have been listed. Table 2 identifies the number of years that the principal has been assigned to the school, the school in the study and the type of school in the study.

Table 2

Principal Participants

Principal	Years as Principal	School	School Letter Grade	Type of School
G. Hainsworth	2	Eureka	D	6-8
T. Kenworthy	6	Willow	D	PreK-8
C. Doherty	1	Great Valley	D	PreK-8
L. Shepard	1	Promise	C	K-5

Overview of Parent Focus Group Themes

Collectively, the parent focus group interviews and the principal interviews provided insight into the participants' perceptions of the roles parents fulfill in their children's education. From the thematic categories listed below and the responses given within those categories, overarching themes emerged that represented the perceptions and experiences of African American parents and school principals.

Theme 1: Perceived barriers.

Data gathered from parents indicated that they wanted to be more engaged, and at a higher level, but there were specific challenges that prevented this. The parent participants reported that transportation and technology were barriers for them. They had the desire to be more engaged and physically present at the school, but lack of transportation prevented them from doing so. Parents also reported that technology resources in Title I schools were not the

same as those in non-Title I schools, and that lack of technology was the primary hindrance to their involvement.

Theme 2: Perceived parental efforts.

The perceived parent effort theme focused on the things that parents did to engage in their child's education and achievement. Parents reported that they ensured their children completed homework, they helped other children in the community complete homework, they communicated with teachers about their child's education, and made provisions for someone significant to be present at the school when they could not be there. Parents reported that other parents in their schools did not put forth an effort to engage in their child's education or to be present at the school.

Theme 3: Perceived principal efforts

This theme focused on the specific things that principals did to engage parents. Parents in three of the four focus groups reported that their principals communicated with them, were visible, were intentional about engaging parents, and were accessible. In parent focus group four, parents reported that their principal was not as intentional with connecting and engaging with them as parents in focus groups one, two, and three indicated.

Theme 4: Perceived teacher efforts.

This theme focused on the specific things teachers did to engage parents. The parents reported that teachers were intentional with their efforts to engage parents. Parents reported that teachers communicated often and in various ways as a means of engaging them.

Overview of Principal Interview Themes

Theme 1: Perceived barriers.

Perceived barriers from the principals' perspective focused on the things that prevented parents from being actively engaged in their child's education, such as work schedules, general life challenges, time, and communication. Principals indicated that when parents were able to balance work, time, and general life experiences, they were more likely to be engaged in their child's education.

Theme 2: Perceived principal efforts.

The principal effort theme focused on the specific things that principals did to engage African American parents in their child's education. The principals indicated that engaging parents in the educational process was important to them and that they are more intentional with parent engagement at this point during their tenure as principals. They reported that structures for parent engagement are in place, but at a surface level. Each of the principals focused on building relationships with parents and the school community as a strong aspect of their parent engagement efforts.

Theme 3: Perceived teacher efforts.

This theme focused on the specific things teachers do to engage African American parents in their child's education. Principals reported that teachers were a vital component of parent engagement. When teachers were intentional in explaining specific aspects of the school such as homework, class and school expectations and policies along with collaborating with parents, students benefited. Barriers of time and professional development were mentioned within the teacher effort theme. Principals reported that teachers did not often have the time to communicate with parents as frequently as they would like in order to have a positive impact on engagement. Additionally, principals reported that

some teachers did not have the skill set to effectively engage parents in their child's education.

Theme 4: Perceived parent experiences.

This theme focused on the positive or negative experiences that impact African American parent engagement. The principals reported that the negative experiences parents faced were generally related to student violations of the code of student conduct, and general student discipline. In this area, the principals indicated it was important for them to build relationships with parents. Regarding positive experiences, principals reported that parents were more engaged and physically present at the school when their child was being celebrated at a school function such as open house, assemblies, enrichment activities, extracurricular activities, or for academic achievement.

Parent Emergent Themes

Four themes emerged to reveal the parents' perspectives about their involvement in their schools and their children's achievement: (a) barriers, (b) parent effort, (c) principal effort, and (d) teacher effort. The themes were common across four focus group discussions in which African American parents discussed their involvement at their schools.

Theme 1: Barriers.

Many of the parents who participated in the focus group discussions talked about transportation as a barrier to more involvement at their child's school. Paige Lowe said,

There's a lot of parents who don't have transportation. I've brought some parents who live on my block up to the school that had to come to the school for something, and they've asked me if I'd take them and I bring them.

Ruby Armstrong supported Lowe, stating, "The biggest thing is transportation."

Transportation was an ongoing theme in the discussion. Some parents had transportation

challenges because they did not have a car at home, while another parent, Courtney Fletcher, indicated that she had one car that she shared with her husband. “My thing is transportation. My husband ... unfortunately, we’ve got just one car, and he works. So, I would love to be involved more, but because of transportation, I can’t.” Ms. Fletcher went on to explain that her son was in the seventh grade and that he wanted to become more active in athletic events, but transportation was a concern. She wanted to be more involved because she did not want her son feeling as if there was an absent mother in his life when his father is not able to attend functions. Ms. Fletcher said,

So, I want to be involved more because I know his dad can’t. And I don’t want them to think it’s an absentee mother that’s not there, but because of transportation, it’s just hard for me get around. But I’m really going to be more involved this year.

Each of the parents who discussed transportation as a challenge continued to express their commitment to being involved in their child’s education. In school B focus group, transportation was not considered a major barrier, but technology and parent education were noted as barriers.

Parents discussed technology as a barrier to their involvement in their children’s education. Nevaeh Dodson discussed the lack of resources that Project L.I.F.T. and Title I schools have for educational access.

Just because we’re in a Project L.I.F.T. zone or a Title I school doesn’t mean our children shouldn’t have the same access to education as other areas in Charlotte, because it’s still a CMS based program. So whatever their child is getting in this zip code, this child should be able to have access in this zip code.

This sentiment was supported by Sharon O’Neal, who said,

I definitely want to agree with the technology standpoint, because where we live, I’ve tried different service providers, but it’s just hard to get the Internet. And when his teacher wants him to get on Google, or I need to get on Google or email someone, it’s hard, because he can’t just go to the computer and log on.

Parent participants continued to discuss their inability to access technology and the internet as a barrier to communication with their children's teachers and to assisting their children with homework. Talia Garner added that parent education was a problem when it came to parents being actively involved at her school.

Parent education was noted as a challenge to parents being actively involved in their child's education. Talia Garner said, "They feel that maybe they don't have the education or the time to do it, but as a parent, you take on that responsibility regardless." Other parents in the focus group added to the discussion, "If you don't know the answer, you're going to find someone who does, and it's going to come down to a personal decision," said Faith Cooper. Talia Garner concurred, saying,

I don't think any one person or one thing is going to get them to do it. You're just going to have to make them feel comfortable to come to someone and say, 'Hey, I want to help my child. Can you show me some things that I can get help to help them?'

While parent initiative was deemed a barrier, many of the parents in the focus group discussed their efforts to being more involved in their child's life.

Theme 2: Parent effort.

Parent participants in the study spoke of a few specific things they did to collaborate with the school and to be involved in their child's education. Sariah Zimmerman described how she creates the time for her child to complete homework and how she extends her child's learning at home after school.

There is no television during the week. You're going to come in; there will be an assignment. There's whatever school gives you and then whatever Auntie gives you. And what I'm giving you is probably going to have to do with either money management, because we don't know enough about it, and consequently we're not teaching our children that. So he's eleven with a bank account, and you better be able to tell me what interest is and how it accrues.

Zimmerman explained how other parents send their children to her for tutoring afterschool. “I have parents on my block that send their children to me for tutoring in a particular subject and I applaud them because there are other parents that just don’t.” Ruby Armstrong described how she goes to different functions at the school, serves in the Parent Teacher Association, meets the teachers and meets the principal, all in an effort to make her child feel comfortable at school and in class. She said parents need to “just be open and be aware of situations.” In the same conversation, Taraji House described times that she left work to sit with her child in class.

And it has been times when I have to come and sit in my son’s class, because my son wants to be a fool. So, I have to come and sit in his class for the whole period, just to make sure he’s doing what he is supposed to.

House also explained that she could not always come to the school because of her work schedule, so she relied on her mother to be a point of contact. House’s mother, Amber Owen, interjected, “I have three grandchildren, and I am 150%.” Evelyn Newman, representing her grandson, came to the focus group alone. She explained that her grandson got in a lot of trouble because he finishes his work early and he is very active. She said,

I make them read when they’re at my house. I don’t know if y’all know I’m a Jehovah’s Witness. So, we’ve always got something to do. They’ve got to participate in my homework that I have to do for Jehovah’s Witness. So we just take turns reading, or knocking on the doors, and then we’re out in service.

Other parent participants spoke of their efforts in talking with their children about their day and their homework.

Faith Cooper described her efforts at being involved in her child’s education and school by communicating with her daughter’s teacher. She stated, “Parents should reach out; the teachers should reach out. It should be a two-way communication street.” She

continued, “I communicate with [the teacher] as often as I can, and she’s very flexible with meeting with me, either via text or email, Facebook, which is convenient for me when I have to work.” Parent participants described several technological ways in which teachers communicated with them, which allowed them to have firsthand information about their children. This communication allowed parents to have a direct conversation about what they did well or not so well during the day. Jasmin Watson described how she uses the Dojo communication system when asking her child about his day in school. “This Dojo point system that we can actually look at online all during the day, I know exactly what he’s doing when he’s doing it.” When Watson’s son gets in the car, she talks with him about it. Some parent participants at the elementary level spoke about their use of tools like Dojo to monitor their child’s progress in school. Other parents, like Faith Cooper, spoke about a more hands-on approach she used to support her high school age child.

Cooper has a child in high school and a child in elementary school. She says her efforts at being involved in her high school son’s education have heightened greatly over the years. As he went from elementary school to high school, her level of involvement in the classroom decreased, but she has not stopped helping him with homework and research methods during his high school years. “It’s my responsibility that he knows how to write a paper,” she said. She set high expectations for her son when it came to completing homework and writing assignments. She stated, “Whatever your teacher accepts – no. They’re too lenient, in my opinion. So my son knows when he writes a paper, if it doesn’t pass my standards, it’s not getting turned in.” She does this because in high school “they don’t care. They are preparing you for college. So as a parent, I have to stay on him ... ‘cause nobody else is going to hold him accountable.”

Many parent participants spoke passionately about the things they did to help their children in school, and in some cases, how they helped other children. Not all parent participants shared the same sentiments for other parents in the school. They revealed that some parents in the school are not taking the same level of interest and active involvement in their children's education and the school as they are taking. Jim Watson expressed that he felt parents "needed to be held accountable at some point" when they are not doing their part. "I'm not saying anything harsh, but you should, if you have children, want to be involved, but it's sad that a lot of them don't." Some of the things parents felt other parents could do to be more involved were the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), Parent University, extracurricular activities, and school events. They reported a low turnout of parents to many of the school events. Mya Brown talked about parents not attending events and how low the participation was when some parents did attend. She said, "And when they have the Parent University classes, there's not that many parents that show up. Might be one or two. Definitely Open House. I mean, that's the main thing they should come to, and they don't."

Some parent participants in the focus groups provided justifications for the lack of involvement. Mitch Brown linked the lack of participation to age. He said, "I think a lot of them, too, are young parents with children. You know, they're young themselves, and they haven't grown up yet, so they don't know what to do." Some of the other focus group participants agreed. However, Frances Watson said, "They just don't care. They don't take the initiative to find out. You can ask somebody – I'll help anybody. But you know, you just have to ask. That's the only way you're going to know. Open your mouth and ask."

Theme 3: Principal effort.

Parent participants described the efforts that principals put forth to engage parents, ranging from being consistently available to parents to not being available at all. Most parents reported that their principals had some form of intentionality to engage parents and to make connections with them. “She’s always there. You can always find [the principal]. She’s at the games, 4:00, 5:30, 6:00 o’clock – wherever we’re at, she’s there,” said Paige Lowe. Principals being available to parents was a consistent theme across multiple focus groups. Mitch Brown stated, “I know just from being here, and seeing [the principal] around the school, she makes herself available for any parent.” Parents were pleased about the visibility of their principals and their support of school functions. Most parents reported that they liked the reminders and the weekly automatic telephone communication sent out by the principal.

Parents discussed how principals put forth an effort to engage them in academics. Sharon O’Neal stated that her principal engages parents by “inviting them out to the literacy nights, the math, all these things. They’re inviting the parents out, engaging them and feeding them.” On a more individual approach, Jim Watson stated, “In my parent-teacher conference, [the teacher] was expressing concern about the curriculum and how it wasn’t really the best designed to help our kids learn. So she went to the principal, and the principal said, ‘Let’s change it, then.’” For Jim Watson, this “spoke volumes” because he felt that his principal was “putting that trust in her staff to make changes that [the teacher] sees necessary.” In three of the four focus groups, parents felt as if their principals were putting forth a valuable effort to engage them in their children’s education. The fourth focus group had different perceptions regarding the efforts of their principal.

Parents in focus group four did not feel that their principal did enough to engage parents in the school. “I don’t think enough, actually. I think she’s a diplomat and when there’s a problem, she’s very good at CYA. And she will say or do whatever she needs to, to protect her behind and the image of the school,” said Sariah Zimmerman. Other parents in the focus group expressed similar feelings regarding their principal. Martha Watson stated,

I’m going to tell you, I met her one time, but I never spoke to her. She came into this meeting today, but she didn’t have time to speak to anybody. And they announced who she was, but she didn’t speak to everybody in the meeting.

Generally, the parents did not feel that there was an effort by the principal to make a connection and engage parents. Based on some of the statements from the parent participants, the researcher offered Ms. Zimmerman a separate individual interview. Ms. Zimmerman declined the interview, but stated,

Schools that are in, I’m looking for the right words, disenfranchised communities, need to have administrators who are sensitive to their communities, to the culture of their communities, and to its differences. And by that I mean, don’t assume, because you see a certain amount of melanin, that you’re going to get a certain behavior. I don’t like being handled, and I know that has happened.

Theme 4: Teacher effort.

Parent participants in all four focus groups described a high level of effort by teachers to engage parents. There were positive affirmations about teacher efforts from each of the participants. Many of the strategies that teachers implemented were discussed in the communication and parent effort themes. This was important to note because the discussion highlights parents reaching out to teachers and teachers reaching out to parents. Discussion of this theme revealed that parents were treated more as equals in their children’s education. Jim Watson said, “I communicate with [the teacher] as often as I can, and she’s very flexible with meeting with me, either via text or email, Facebook, which is convenient for me when I

have to work.” For Watson, the efforts by the teacher were ongoing in an informal manner that worked for both the teacher and parent. Similarly, Evelyn Newman stated, “The teachers write notes in [the students’] little books, in their little folders, to let me know what they did, or they’re good or bad in class, and they let me know if there’s a meeting or something.”

Teachers were deemed to have been intentional about communicating with parents and giving parents the opportunity to communicate with them. Also, teachers provided multiple ways to communicate with and to engage with parents. As for Martha Watson, “They’re more hands-on ... than the principal.”

Principal Emergent Themes

Four themes emerged simultaneously as principals shared their perspectives of African American parent involvement and student achievement: (a) barriers, (b) parent experiences, (c) principal effort, and (d) teacher effort. Sub-themes provided context for each larger theme. The barriers theme included the following sub-themes: (a) parent work schedules, (b) general life circumstances, (c) time, and (d) communication. For the parent experiences theme, the sub-themes were (a) positive experiences, and (b) negative experiences.

Theme 1: Barriers.

Principal interviews revealed similar barriers that they believe prevent parents from being involved in their schools, but, there were contextual differences in the principals’ descriptions of the sub-themes. In discussing parent work schedules, the principals indicated that some parents wanted to be more involved at the school and with their children but their work schedules prevented them from being physically present at the school. Catrina Doherty stated,

Our parents not being able to make it because of work, which is obviously totally understandable, so sometimes it's just literally what they have going on in their life and they can't make it here. Or they can only come at 5:00 p.m. or 7:00 a.m. and we still try to make that work, but it doesn't get as many people at the table.

A similar response from Lanie Shepard indicated that parents' work schedules prevented parents from being physically present at the school.

I would say with them it's the time as well, because when I say that our parents are working class parents, some work the late shift, some work the early shift, and my teachers are here at 7:00, 7:15, and they can't always stay until 6:00 or 6:30 to meet with a parent. That's just too long of a day.

Parent work schedules, according to the principals, presented a challenge. Grayce Hainsworth noted that parents do make an effort to stay informed when there are work challenges. According to Hainsworth, "They may not be able to come immediately, but they'll call, they'll email, they'll make arrangements if they have to."

Principals identified general life challenges as another barrier to parental involvement, citing parents' need to meet their most immediate priorities for survival. Grayce Hainsworth stated,

At the end of the day, they have the best interests of their child at heart, and they're very overwhelmed by their life circumstance, which often times creates a type of relationship dynamic where them being involved, and sometimes in which we need to, can be an additional burden. I hate to use that word as if it seems they don't want to, but they have, you know, Maslow's hierarchy of needs in mind of safety, shelter first, and by them being involved it might compromise one of those needs, which creates some challenges for their involvement.

The principals shared sentiments regarding the life challenges that plagued the parents they serve. "They just have so much going on," stated Thomasine Kenworthy as she described the crises that parent's experience. "Every day there's a crisis somewhere. Someone got kicked out of the house, just so far this year, a father passed away, last week one of our sixth grader's father passed away." Many of the challenging events described

were major life altering events for the parents. “Big life things are happening all the time, so I think that just really prevents them from being here,” said Kenworthy.

Principals reported that time was a barrier for parents. The principals’ responses to time as a challenge applied to the principal having time to prioritize parent involvement, parents having time to be physically involved because of their work schedules, and teachers having time to engage parents. Grayce Hainsworth described time for parent involvement as a challenge in prioritizing it as a goal in her school. “We were trying to keep people safe. And trying to keep people safe, you know, there wasn’t the same level of intentionality around some things, and I think parent engagement was one of those.” This was not the case for Lanie Shepard. “My biggest challenge is usually time,” she said. She did note, in reference to parents’ work schedules, that she makes provisions in her schedule to allow parents to visit the school after hours. “So they can’t always leave their job and come straight to the school if we need them, but if I say, ‘Hey, I’ll stay until 5:30 p.m.’ they’ll be here.”

Principal respondents described teacher time to engage parents as a challenge. “I think it’s just time, and part of it is, you make time for what you prioritize, and at the same time, teachers are responsible for a lot, and they have a lot of kids,” stated Grayce Hainsworth. Hainsworth reported not having the time to develop relationships with her staff, so it would be difficult for teachers to develop those same relationships with their parents and kids. As a point of comparison, she stated, “I struggle to have really deep, intimate relationships with the 150 people on my staff, so to have this expectation that they have really deep, meaningful relationships with 120 kids that they teach is not reasonable.” This response speaks to time, but there is also a point of expectation for how teachers are to prioritize parent engagement in

their classes. Similarly, Thomasine Kenworthy referenced teachers not having time to engage parents because of class size and frequent changes in parent telephone numbers.

Kenworthy stated,

It is so hard to get hold of our parents. So, with a teacher being in a classroom with 20-plus kids, and every time you dial a number it's a new number, and it's still not working, so the inaccessibility of our parents is very hard for them and that takes a lot of time.

Catrina Doherty had a similar assertion:

There's never enough time. I would love for teachers to set aside time that I'm giving them to make positive phone calls on the front end, but they're having to just infuse that into their already packed schedules, and so a resource would literally be more time to do it, to match my expectation with their schedules, that it's something they understand where it fits. It's not like I need a parent communication log to solve this problem. It's more – it's just time.

Principals reported communication as another barrier for parents. Communication presented a challenge for some, but also was an area of intentionality, according to the principals. Principals' descriptions of communication as a challenge encompassed parents not responding, the school reaching out to support students who are experiencing some sort of challenge, and the schools' efforts to share information about school events and student progress. Katrina Doherty stated, "They're not returning phone calls, or they're not visible. They don't come in, and they don't come up. They're not being defiant about it; they're just not there. They're not communicating." Doherty also noted that communication becomes a challenge when relationships have not been established with parents or positive communications have not taken place throughout the school year. "If [teachers] are not prioritizing positive phone calls on the front end, they find themselves only making negative ones and they're surprised that the parent doesn't want to talk to them." Principal Doherty continued:

[Communication] falls by the wayside and then it ends up hurting them when they have to make a first phone call that's negative. That is on them; it's not the parents' fault, but I want to acknowledge that it's not something that's easy for them to do efficiently and it definitely contributes to it not being as successful of a relationship as it could be.

The principals do not disregard communication as a barrier and their ownership in overcoming this barrier. Grayce Hainsworth stated, "Communication can seem like a burden, and it's why haven't we figured out how to make it work with their child rather than calling them to figure it out, because it's our job." Catrina Doherty made a strategic effort to improve communication by providing scripts for her staff to use when communicating with parents.

We have explicit training on what I expect from those phone calls, and then I have a similar training with Behavior Modification Technicians, where they train on what it sounds like to call to deliver bad news. I have scripts for those things. They have to see them; they have to practice them.

Grayce Hainsworth generalized what she described as the "third bucket of parents:"

Parents who, at the end of the day, they have the best interests of their child at heart, and they're very overwhelmed by their life circumstance, which often times creates a type of relationship dynamic where them being involved, and sometimes in which we need to, can be an additional burden.

She described the communication and support offered to the "third bucket" of parents as being more reactive to a situation involving their child at school. She described a time when parents were required to come to the school because of behavior concerns, and how the incident compromised life needs.

Your baby did something that violates the Code of Student Conduct and we need you to come up to the school to pick them up, or to have a conference, which, for some families, that's more than the traditional school event one, two, three times per year. That creates that dynamic where they see us as a burden, because it's compromising the Maslow hierarchy of needs.

Catrina Doherty talked about her school communication support from a different perspective. Her counselors conduct outreach events to engage parents, and Doherty wanted to ensure that the communication from the counselors was effective and meaningful. Priorities for her include: “making sure my counselors are doing outreach events and doing progress report pick-up days, and communicating that in a way that makes parents excited about it.”

Lanie Shepard spoke about a different communication experience in her school. This was her second year in her current school and she noted that communication in this school was much different than in her previous school. “So, I came from a school where there was not as much positive parent communication, so I would say in that instance, this is much better.” She described various ways in which her school and teachers used technology to communicate with parents.

Texting parents, sending parents pictures of their kids holding up their test scores with ‘They scored 100,’ or ‘They scored 95,’ or whatever it is, celebrating with them. Telling the parents, ‘Hey, here’s a picture of Raymond. Look how hard he’s working today.’ Sending texts or emails that say, ‘Jeannette’s having a great day.’

In her school, there was an effort to text parents because of their work schedules. “We are texting back and forth with parents,” the principal stated. She noted that her staff was very specific with their communication to parents. “We try to be very specific on what dates we’re going to have parent events. Because when they come, we want them here and engaged, and as many parents as we can to get whatever information we’re giving out.”

Theme 2: Experiences.

The principals talked about parent negative experiences having an impact on their involvement with their children. Some of those experiences may not have had a direct

connection to the principal, but there was something that took place at the principal's school that created a level of dissatisfaction or a negative experience for the parent. Grayce Hainsworth said this about her third bucket of parents, "I think about that third bucket is often times the parents who are sending me emails because they're dissatisfied with something." The principals were fully aware that parents had some negative experiences in their schools. Grayce Hainsworth explained her thinking about parent perceptions and interactions at her school:

I think just doing the work through other people, and acknowledging that parent perception, the majority of the time, is developed based upon interaction with someone who isn't me and acknowledge those experiences and how they could start addressing the concern.

Similarly, Catrina Doherty noted that parents in her school had interactions with other staff members that caused them to have negative perceptions.

When we try to repair the relationship, there's a lot of learned behaviors around, 'I don't trust you guys.' They might not even be talking to the same people, but it's a general mistrust in school and what the school is doing for my child.

Doherty referenced students having a discipline issue in the school as a source for parents not having a positive interaction with the school. "They come up when they're upset," she said. Both Hainsworth and Doherty acknowledged that they wanted more strategic efforts to give parents better experiences to shape their perceptions about school. Hainsworth commented:

[Parent] perception is based on that interaction. So, what is the work that I need to do as a leader, and what are mindsets that I have to push my people in so what I'm saying about replicating this philosophy and belief around parent engagement will be actualized?

While two of the principal respondents spoke of more negative parent experiences and perceptions, this was not the case for all of the principal respondents.

Thomasine Kenworthy talked about how her parents were not as involved or had some concerns, “but then, when they see how excited the child is about it, they start to get excited about it too.” She attributed this to the school’s focus on engaging parents as more of a community themselves. “When we started to move in that direction last year, we saw parental involvement increase,” the principal said. Similarly, Grayce Hainsworth talked about a smaller portion of her parent population that was more engaged from participating in celebratory experiences.

We invite them into the building to really celebrate the accomplishments of our kids. For example, we have our largest extracurricular activity, or afterschool club is R3. It’s a book club. We have about 50-60 kids who participate in R3 and about halfway through the school year, the staff members who lead that program hosted a family pancake dinner where all the families came out and celebrated reading.

She said this was one of the more positive experiences for parents at her school. Catrina Doherty discussed similar experiences for parents who participated in celebratory events, noting that these events provide a way for her to positively interact with parents.

We’ve been doing, with our reading curriculum this year, a lot of end of module parties, so our positive involvement comes when parents come to those things and are celebratory with kids. So I would say, at all those events and through those ways, I experience parents in a really positive way.

Lanie Shepard discussed the positive experiences for her parents through the lens of how her staff communicates with them. “There’s just a lot of frequent contact. We try really hard to do the positive contact,” Shepard said. She discussed how this has led to more increased parent participation and involvement in and out of the school.

A huge majority of my parents are engaged. Like I said, they’re not here on campus, but they’re at home doing the work, and that’s what I need more than anything. When we have our big parent events, it’s wall-to-wall parents, standing room only.

Further, she explained that she had an active Parent Teacher Association (PTA) that helped to increase the positive experiences at her school.

I have a pretty active PTA, and so I meet with the PTA Board once a month, and encourage them to be proactive in our school and do things, and work with those different PTA parents on the PTA Board for different events.

Each of the principals described the positive and negative experiences that their parents had at their schools. Most of the positive experiences were driven by student celebrations around academic achievement. The excitement generated by students performing better in school created more parent participation in school events. The negative parent experiences were driven by a student violation of the code of conduct or by interactions with staff members other than the principal. Interactions with other staff members were not described in detail.

Theme 3: Principal effort.

The principal interviews highlighted similar actions that principals took to engage parents in their schools. Each principal had a different approach. According to Catrina Doherty, “We’re making some intentional efforts structurally to help parents understand how they fit in, and to help them understand that we care about them being involved. It’s my job to make sure that those structures exist.” The ownership that she took for making this her job was to create structures in her building that focused on parent engagement and then ensuring that she had staff assigned to those areas to maintain the structures. Doherty noted that the process did not take a lot of her time and energy.

Those are all structures that I just literally passed down. It’s not even a heavy lift for me, it’s just picking the right group or making the right system and training on it and empowering my other leaders to help reinforce it as well.

Lanie Shepard discussed her evolution of being intentional with parent engagement from her first year to her second year at her school.

Well, I'm going to tell you, I struggled with that last year, being new here. I try to be out, open, where the parents see me. So I made it kind of my job, my role, to be out at car pool every day to see the parents. I like to come through in the morning when the parents are here and stop to chat, and talk to them. I did ConnectEd messages a lot last year to try to engage parents just in what was coming up at school for the next week, to let them know, but I have to be a little more intentional this year.

Shepard emphasized that communication in her school had to be two-way. She stated, "Two-way communication goes on between the teachers and the parents, and even myself and the parents." She included herself in that cycle of communication because she wanted her parents to have a relationship with her. Similarly, Catrina Doherty talked about her efforts in building relationships with parents. She said this is an area she works on.

It's something that I work actively to get past and prove otherwise. I have these opportunities with families to just sit down with them and prove to them that I know their child, that I care about their child, and just prove that I'm worth listening to and respecting and we can build a relationship from there.

Building relationships with parents was a consistent theme in the principals' efforts to engage parents. Thomasine Kenworthy spoke about how she allowed parents to bring her complaints and then when the parent calmed down and healthy conversation had taken place, she engaged the parents in an academic conversation about their children. Kenworthy stated,

Whenever I have a parent that has a complaint and they want to come in here and talk to me, I'll let them come in and talk to me, and hear them out, and we'll get on our feel good side, and then before they leave, I ask them, 'So tell me, what reading level is your child on right now?'

She asks her parents a series of questions during face-to-face encounters, and finds that many times, parents were not aware of the information she is asking them about. "And a lot

of times I'll have parents look at me and not know what I'm even talking about, until I literally sit down and explain it to them," said Kenworthy.

Kenworthy also discussed some of the formal activities she implements with school funds to support parental engagement. She talked about the book and manipulative initiative that she started in the previous school year with kindergarten students. "This year we've expanded it, K, 1, 2. And when they come in for their parent night, they receive bags of books, bags of manipulatives, cubes, and things like that to take home." The intended outcome of this initiative was to have parents support the child's learning at home.

Kenworthy explained how her teachers were working with parents so that there was a continuation of learning at home.

And the teachers show them two or three different things that they can do with the books and with the math manipulatives at the house that will reinforce what we're doing here at school. They also will tell those things that they don't even need books and manipulatives for, that they can help reinforce things that are going on here at the school.

Three principal respondents explained the structures they had in place at their schools, the relationships that they were building with parents, and how they used resources to support parent engagement. Grayce Hainsworth did not talk about specific principal efforts or systems, but acknowledged that this was the work she wanted to focus on more in her school. "I don't think we have any type of system. I can't tell you who has attended the most conferences, or what teams are really building strong engagement. That piece I don't think we have a defined system for yet."

Theme 4: Teacher effort.

Principals reported that teachers' efforts to engage parents was an ongoing strategy in their schools. Many of the engagement successes that principals noted were driven by

teachers. Catrina Doherty stated that her parent engagement was “attributed to having better teachers at our school.” Although the principals described lack of time for teachers to contact parents as a barrier, the efforts that teachers were able to make in their schools were proving to be beneficial. Catrina Doherty commented:

It’s not necessarily that these kids of these families are always doing the right thing. It’s not like it’s our honor roll, all-star scholars’ families that are involved. It’s not about that. It’s more that they reach out, they have teachers that communicate with them or vice versa.

Thomasine Kenworthy reported that when teachers took the time to explain the achievement levels of students to parents, the parents became more engaged. She said,

So, they need to understand that this is what a Level D looks like, this is where your child is, and this is where your child needs to be by this certain time, and here’s how you can help at home. And the teachers who do that well with the parents, we usually see a very good engagement with them.

The principals also noted time and teacher competency as challenges to the best efforts of teachers to engage parents. Grayce Hainsworth explained that her teachers

... have the skill to do the basic phone call, email, and be a bit inquisitive around if the phone number doesn’t work. The biggest thing is the capacity, as well as the skill. I don’t think all of my teachers are skilled in [engaging parents] ... that’s a skill. What does that sound like? What does that look like? What’s the conversation when you get there?

Hainsworth further explained that she has tried a few things at her school to build teacher capacity for communicating with parents, including having teachers practice conversing with parents.

The thing that comes top of mind is literally practicing a conversation with a parent. We need to stay balanced and positively frame everything we do, so not just practicing when I have to call, but practicing what does an authentic, celebratory parent phone call sound like?

Because of a similar concern, Catrina Doherty provided scripts for her staff to follow when communicating with parents. Additionally, she has volunteered her school for a Home

Visit Teacher Project pilot program so that staff can be professionally trained by an external source to build parent communication and engagement competencies. Doherty noted that this would be her first experience in parent communication professional development.

The Home Visit pilot that we're doing, we're getting externally trained on that, just our sixth grade team in two weeks, and I'm excited about that because I'm interested in doing that because I've never gone to a parent communication training before.

While Lanie Shepard does not have a formal professional development established for her teachers, she stated, "Some of my teachers don't know how to interact with parents. They're young and green." She explained it as a facet of her school that she knows needs support; therefore, she built coaching teachers on parent conversation into her professional development plan. "That's one of the things the coaches work with [teachers] on. How do you make those positive calls? How do you call a parent when you need to have a crucial conversation about their child?" According to Shepard, conversing with parents "comes naturally for some people, and others it doesn't. We're a coach school, so that's one of the things – that's just part of the deal."

Summary

This chapter presented the results obtained from four parent focus group interviews and four one-on-one principal interviews revealing the aforementioned themes. These themes will be further discussed in chapter five, which will describe the alignment to the selected framework, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005).

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter five contains an overview of the research study, explication of the findings, implications for practice and policy, recommendations for future research, and conclusions. Previous research indicated that parent involvement in the educational process has a positive impact on student achievement. The specific beliefs and actions that parents demonstrate continue to be an area for further investigation. The purpose of this study was to examine urban African American parents' perspectives regarding their role in student achievement in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community, which emphasizes parent engagement with a goal of improved student performance.

Chapter one provided the significance of the study, problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, and conceptual framework for the study. In this chapter, the problem statement described the impact of parent involvement on student achievement and the need to know more about the perceptions of African American parents' role in student achievement. In order to understand the roles filled by African American parents, the Hoover- Dempsey and Sandler (2005) parent involvement framework was presented as the conceptual framework for the study.

Chapter two reviewed prior research on African American parent involvement. In this chapter, the mandates, benefits, barriers, and strategies for parent involvement were reviewed. Chapter two provided research on parent involvement frameworks, trends, issues, and gaps.

Chapter three described the methodology used for the study and why case study methodology is appropriate. In this chapter, the context, participants, role of the researcher, and analysis process were presented, along with the research questions used to guide the study.

1. What are Project L.I.F.T.'s African American parents' beliefs about their role in their child's academic achievement?
2. What are Project L.I.F.T.'s African American parents' beliefs about the school's role in their child's academic achievement?
3. How do Project L.I.F.T.'s African American parents partner with the school for their child's academic achievement?
4. How do Project L.I.F.T.'s school principals perceive the role of African American parents in student achievement?

The case study research methods used for this study provided answers to how and why African American parents engage for the benefit of their child's academic achievement.

Parent involvement and home-school partnerships make a difference for a student's academic, social, and emotional growth (Jeynes, 2004; Turner, Nye, & Schwartz, 2004). While a significant amount of research has yielded findings that support parent involvement as having a positive impact on student achievement, challenges remain for urban African American parents. Cooper and Crosnoe (2007) argued that factors such as the lack of money and time impacted economically disadvantaged African American parents' level of involvement in their children's education.

The literature review supported parent engagement as a vital factor in the educational achievement of students, especially African American students. The authors emphasized the

importance of families, community groups, and educators in the educational process for student success. The research examined what parents, teachers, and administrators can do to implement effective parental engagement in schools. The literature revealed many benefits for schools and students when parents are actively engaged in their child's education. While there are many benefits of parent engagement, numerous barriers prevent parents from engaging at the level that school personnel and parents expect. More information is needed to determine how parents and administrators perceive their roles in increasing the level of parent engagement to support student academic achievement.

Numerous studies have examined parents' perceptions of parent involvement. Some of these studies support the suggestion that there is a relationship between race, income, and the level of parent involvement. There is a need to intentionally bridge the gap between the perceptions of parents and the perceptions of principals as a start to increasing, enhancing, and maintaining parental involvement.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this section is to present the findings from the study in terms of the research questions presented in chapter four. The study focused on urban African American parents' perceptions of their role in student achievement. This study indicated that while there is a variety of efforts by parents, teachers, and principals to engage parents, there are also barriers that prohibit parents from being more engaged in the student achievement process with their children, as well as barriers that prevent schools from actively engaging parents at a higher level. Based on the findings, the researcher concluded that awareness of parent efforts to engage and the barriers that prevent them from engaging is a necessity for schools to acknowledge and accept when seeking to build parent to school relationships, and

parent engagement policies and programs. The researcher suggests that the findings in this study support previous research on parent involvement as a means of benefitting student achievement. The collected data in this study indicate that parents have a genuine desire to be engaged in their schools and with their children. Epstein (1995) explains that involving parents in planning and decision-making processes is one of the most important strategies for active engagement. The findings from this study support intentional collaboration between schools and parents to provide valuable experiences and gains for students.

The study addressed four research questions that examined the perceptions of African American parents regarding their role in their child's achievement, and teachers' and principals' efforts to engage them. The findings presented below represent the research questions that guided this study.

Parent Focused Research Questions

The first research question addressed African American parents' beliefs about their role in their child's academic achievement. Stories told by African American parents in the four focus groups reflected their present engagement and roles in helping their children achieve in school. Focus group participants shared ways in which they engage in their child's education. The focus groups findings are consistent with DeMoss and Vaughn (2000), who indicated that parents with school age children agree that parental engagement and presence at school is reflective of their efforts to be involved in their children's education. DeMoss and Vaughn (2000) also reported that parents engage in other ways that are not often discussed by researchers and school staff.

African American parents are generally categorized as being inactive, disconnected, aggressive, or confrontational (Koonce & Harper, 2005). Because of these categorizations,

educators often assume that the culture and values of African American parents do not support the school's process of educating children. The perception that African American parents don't care about their children's academics and overall education was challenged by the participants in this study. Stories told by parents in the focus groups reflected their efforts and desire to play an active role in their child's education. Parents in this study expressed the importance of supporting their children in school and the vital role that they fulfill in their children's academic success. The stories and views shared by the parents in this study validate the findings in the literature regarding urban African American parents. Many studies noted a relationship between parent engagement and improved school performance. Students with involved parents, no matter the income level or background, are more likely to have success in school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

The stories told by parents regarding their efforts to engage in their child's education and the roles that they position themselves in to support their child's achievement should be acknowledged and cultivated by school staff. This was evident as parents described how they supported their children at home in ways that the school may not be privy to, such as helping their child and other children with homework, asking about their child's day in school, and ensuring that someone significant is present at school functions when the parents could not attend. Schools should not assume that African American parents are not interested in their children's education, but instead should provide resources and activities for parents to use with their children at home.

Parent perspectives related to research question one align to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) parent engagement model. The first major factor of influence for parent involvement in level one of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) framework is

personal motivators. On this level, the self-efficacy motivator of the model describes the behaviors or actions that parents demonstrate to support the desired outcomes for their child's education, meaning parents in the study believed their involvement in their child's education would have a positive impact on achievement. The second personal motivator is role construction. In this study, parents believed that it was their role to take specific actions to support their child's achievement in conjunction with the school. In a broader context, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995 and 1997) defined parent involvement as helping with homework and discussing school activities. This is significant, because according to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995) definition, African American parents in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community are involved in their children's education. These findings provide an opportunity for more investigation into actions demonstrated by parents relating to the remaining two factors of level one in the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) model: (a) parents' perceptions of invitations to be involved, and (b) life context variables that influence their involvement.

The second research question examined African American parents' beliefs about the school's role in their child's academic achievement. Parents described their perspectives of the roles that schools should play in their child's education, categorized by what teachers, principals, and Project L.I.F.T. do in regard to student achievement. The findings of this study did not support the research that "teachers often perceive African American parents as uninvolved and disinterested in their children's education" (Fields-Smith, 2005, p. 130). While Brandon (2007) identified factors such as school-home communication, parent-teacher interaction, and school-parent interactions as barriers to parent engagement, parents in this study shared that there were intentional efforts by teachers and school staff to communicate

with them and to engage them in their child's education. Brandon (2007) identified other factors such as economics, parent educational level, and personal constraints (e.g., lack of time, lack of transportation, and lack of child care) as barriers to parent involvement, which parents in this study indicated as barriers as well.

The parents' educational level, created a barrier for their level of engagement. This finding was consistent with the research from Brandon (2007). However, when applied to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) framework, the sense of efficacy was not the barrier for parents. Parents in this study conveyed a sense that their actions and skills would allow them to help their children achieve in school. From the principals' perspectives in the study, parents' sense of efficacy prevented them from contributing significantly to their children's achievement. The disconnect between the perspectives of parents and those of principals provides an opportunity for school personnel to understand and investigate barriers to parent involvement (Thompson, 2003). Parents will benefit from clear explanations and guidance on the things they can do to support their child's learning. Furthermore, parents will benefit from schools establishing flexible meeting locations and offering workshops for homework help (Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein, 2008).

Parent participants shared perspectives about what their teachers and principals did to engage them and to support their child's achievement. Both principal effort and teacher effort themes centered on specific things that each did to engage parents. Parents noted that principals and teachers communicated with them about their children and school events, and that principals and teachers were intentional in their efforts to connect and engage with them. Very limited data emerged to support level one of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) framework. One of the three major factors of influence for parent involvement in level one is

the parents' perception of invitations from the school to welcome parents in an all-inclusive manner, and specific teacher invitations to parents for at-home learning or parent conferences.

The stories shared by parents support Sheldon (2003), who indicated that if teachers encouraged parents, parents were more likely to get involved in their children's education. The parent perspectives are consistent with Epstein and Sheldon (2002) in that open communication between parent and teachers can benefit the academic success of students.

The findings for research question two are significant because parents' responses contradict the responses of principals. Level 1.5 of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) parent involvement model defines four different forms in which parents engage in their child's education: (a) values, goals, expectations, and aspirations; (b) involvement activities at home; (c) parent/teacher/school communication; and (d) involvement activities at school. This level of the model gives principals clarity and understanding for the ways in which parents may engage in their child's education.

The third research question examined how African American parents partnered with the school for their child's achievement. Parent participants related specific ways in which they partner with the school to help their children achieve, acknowledging that they played a critical role in supporting their children's academic trajectory. Most of the parents are active members of the school's Parent Teacher Association. The actions that each of the parents described as their method of being involved in their child's education were consistent with the research from Wittreich and Hogue (2003) in that their actions are a recognized form of school-based parent involvement (e.g., participating in scheduled conferences and participating in the Parent Teacher Association). The participants also told stories about how

they monitored their child's grades through PowerSchool, had one-on-one conversations with teachers, and helped their children study at home, all of which have been defined as traditional methods of parent involvement.

Traditionally, parent involvement has been defined as home-based activities including helping with homework, discussing school concerns, and monitoring a child's progress (Tveit, 2009). The findings from the parent focus groups were consistent with traditional forms of parent involvement. Similarly, the findings were consistent with Brandon and Brown (2009), who asserted that students achieve more when parents partner with schools to create a supportive learning environment, when parents created home learning environments and schools made materials and resources available for children to complete homework, and when parents had a positive attitude toward their child's learning. The ways in which parents in this study partnered with the school and involved themselves in their child's education conveyed a message that education is important. Their efforts engendered personal relationships with the child's teachers and principal. This is consistent with Abrams and Gibbs (2002) and Trotman (2001) in that they found African American parents value the educational success of their children. The findings of this study and from previous research contrast with research that suggests African American parents are less engaged in their children's academic achievement and experiences than are their Caucasian counterparts (Abdul-Abdil & Farmer, 2006).

The findings from research question three correlate to parent involvement forms, Level 1.5 of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) model addressing involvement activities at home: talking about the school day, and monitoring and reviewing their child's homework and school work.

Principal Research Question

The fourth research question examined principals' perspectives about the role of African American parents in student achievement. The principals shared that parents wanted to be involved, but there was a need to be more intentional in engaging parents who had less time, and more transportation and financial constraints than other parents in their schools. Analysis of the principal interviews indicated that parents in the schools can be grouped in three categories: (a) parents who do not have any constraints to prevent their involvement, (b) parents who have constraints that prevent their involvement, and (c) parents who are involved at a minimal level.

Findings from the principals' interviews highlighted the barriers to parent engagement. These findings correlate with the third major factor that influences parent involvement, life context variables, level one of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) parent involvement framework. Analysis of the findings indicated that parents may be constrained by work and other family and life obligations.

The stories shared by principal participants did not explicitly provide insight into how African Americans engaged and the roles that they fulfilled in their child's education beyond the traditional methods of attending school-sponsored events and monitoring homework (Tveit, 2009). Rather, the stories described the barriers that prevented parents from being engaged, the barriers to teachers engaging parents, and the efforts they made to engage parents. These findings were consistent with the research from Fields-Smith (2005), who indicated that researchers and educators often reference African American parent involvement efforts in a negative manner. Webster (2004) stated,

The pessimistic views held by educators and policy makers regarding urban minority parents are largely informed by the rhetoric, romanticism, and

cultural views surrounding their notions of parental involvement. These constructed politicized viewpoints often categorized minority and low-income parents as uninvolved (p. 117).

The perspectives of the principals in this study did not provide specifics on what African American parents did to support their child's educational experiences, thus giving credence to the research of Cooper (2007) and Thompson (2003), who indicated that there is limited research focused on the actual ways in which African American parents support their child's achievement.

The information shared by principals provided insight into the ownership they were taking for more effective parental involvement in their schools. The principals' stories were consistent with the findings of Fullan (2003), who indicated that it is the responsibility of schools, led by their principals, to find ways to expand the roles of parents so that they feel empowered to work as partners with school staff. This is significant for the study because the sense of efficacy to improve the level and quality of parent involvement by principals in an intentional manner may be achieved with the guidance of a parent involvement framework such as that proposed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005).

The overall analysis of each school's academic achievement as measured by the North Carolina accountability model for growth and proficiency indicate that each of the schools in the study has shown improvement in their growth and school performance grades. Great Valley exceeded expected growth during the year of the study from not meeting expected growth in the prior year. Eureka, Willow and Promise maintained the exceeded expected growth status from the prior year of the study. Three of the four schools in the study increased their overall school performance score. Willow's school performance score increased from 42 in the 2014 – 2015 school year to 45 in the 2015 – 2016 school year.

Great Valley's school performance score increased from 33 in the 2014 – 2015 school year to 45 in the 2015 – 2016 school year. Promise Elementary school performance score increased from 60 in the 2014 – 2015 school year to 65 in the 2015 – 2016 school year. The increase in student achievement in these three schools is reflective of the stories told by the parents about their levels of engagement with their children and the school; thus, meaning that parent involvement has a positive impact on student achievement in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study provided a general perspective of the perceptions of African American parents and their role in student achievement in an urban context. The details inherent in the study are useful for others in urban education. Urban education for this study included schools serving a large city with a population greater than 250,000. The study was limited to one learning community in one urban school district in the southeastern United States. The size of the sample is small, which is a limitation to the study. Only four of the nine schools in the learning community were included in the study. The four selected schools represented a larger sampling of the African American parent population in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community. Another limitation to the study is that the data were collected through face-to-face interviews. Data in qualitative studies are subject to interpretation, which is a possible limitation to the study. The collected data represent the perspectives of the parents interviewed in this study, not all African American parents in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community.

Researcher bias was a limitation to the study. As an African American parent and school administrator in the same school district, the researcher has had similar experiences to

those of the parents in the study. The researcher was mindful to remain focused on the research and listen to the stories told by the participants. Because biases from personal and professional experiences may exist in qualitative research and may pose a threat to the validity of the data (Maxwell, 2005), the researcher consulted with a peer researcher to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data.

The findings in this study have significant implications for how and why African American parents engage in the academic achievement of their children in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community. The study focused on African Americans and school principals in the learning community. Future research could be conducted to capture teachers' perceptions of the role of parents in student achievement in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community. Future research could also be conducted as a case study for African American parents' involvement across learning communities within the larger context of the school district. Future studies of how school leaders lead with a parent involvement model will provide benefits to student achievement. Additionally, future research on how school leaders work to get African American parents involved in the child's education will expand the literature on the impact of parent engagement on student achievement.

Understanding the attributes that students demonstrate for their achievement and how those attributes are nurtured by parents and schools may provide more insight into this topic. Alongside future studies using parent involvement models, studies in different contexts such as urban school districts in the northern region of the United States, suburban school districts, and rural school districts may provide a more diverse perspective on how and why African American parents engage in their child's education. Combining multiple perspectives can

enhance educators' and researchers' knowledge of how and why African American parents engage for the benefit of their child's academic achievement.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This study provided insight on the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community's African American parents' beliefs and practices in the roles they filled in their children's academic achievement. The results of this study are important because of the achievement gap that exists between African American students and their counterparts. Considering the evidence from previous research regarding the positive benefits of parent engagement on student achievement, it is of the utmost importance that schools provide opportunities for African American parents to serve in meaningful roles. Henderson and Mapp (2002) stated, "The educational benefits to children include higher grades and test scores, better school attendance, higher graduation rates, greater enrollment in postsecondary education, and more positive attitudes about school" (p. 7). The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) model used to guide this study suggests that parents are motivated by two belief systems: (a) role construction for involvement, and (b) sense of efficacy for helping their child succeed in school. This is important to note because parents' sense of efficacy is significantly influenced by what schools do to engage parents in meaningful roles.

Findings from this study indicated that African American parents in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community are involved in their children's education in various ways. The parents in the study related how they support their children at home and how they communicate with teachers about their child's progress in school. The principals in the study indicated that parents were involved in school-based activities, but did not specifically acknowledge other ways in which parents are engaged in the academic achievement of students.

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) model of parent involvement divides level one of the framework into three categories: (a) personal motivation, which is parental role construction and parental efficacy; (b) invitations, which is general school invitations, specific school invitations, and specific child invitations; and (c) life context variables, which is knowledge and skills, time and energy, and family culture. Principals should acknowledge the gaps between parents' perceptions of their roles and principals' perceptions of parents' roles in student achievement. In alignment with the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) framework, Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community schools should put forth an intentional effort to acknowledge the roles of parents, extend personal invitations to parents, and acknowledge the life context of parents to afford authentic parent involvement opportunities. This will provide a foundation for schools to progress through the remaining levels of the framework, creating a positive correlation of parent involvement and student achievement.

Using the personal motivation category of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) model, Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community schools should seek methods to learn and understand African American parents' beliefs about how to help their children achieve academically. Schools should seek to understand and acknowledge how African American parents assist their children academically, and how the school's influence affects parent motivation. The acknowledgement of a school's influence is important because role construction and self-efficacy is a social construct. Parents' experiences shape their beliefs and actions.

Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community schools should make more intentional and authentic efforts to welcome the families they serve by developing specific strategies to welcome, greet, and embrace African American parents. Additionally, the school should be

responsive to the needs of parents, answering parents' questions and acknowledging their suggestions. In the school invitation category, schools should provide ongoing strategies and opportunities for parents to help their children learn and study at home. In the child invitation sub-category, schools should educate children to self-advocate for help from parents on school work at home.

In the life context category of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) model, Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community schools should understand the knowledge and skills that parents possess, and encourage parents to utilize their skills to support their child's learning at home, and to actively participate in the school's academic programs. Schools may also offer parent education seminars to build African American parents' understanding of what their children are learning in school and how they can better support their child's learning at home. Schools should understand African American parents' time and energy, and create opportunities for parents to adjust their schedules to engage with their child at home and at school, as well as providing parent involvement opportunities at convenient times and locations. In the family culture sub-category of parents' life context variables, schools should seek to understand the culture of the families they serve and respond sensitively to the culture and beliefs of parents.

In conjunction with Level 1.5 of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) model, Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community schools should understand the ways in which parents involve themselves in their child's education. School staff can learn the authentic forms of parent involvement without generating assumptions of how and why African American parents engage in their child's achievement. To further support the understanding of the how and why, Project L.I.F.T. learning community should adopt a parent engagement framework

to guide the parent engagement practices across all schools in the learning community; align Title I parent involvement policies with an adopted engagement framework; and require teachers, staff, and administrators to attend professional development for parent engagement and cultural competency.

Lastly, the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community should understand and support African American parents' beliefs and actions for levels two through five of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) model. Such understanding will encourage meaningful engagement with African American parents, and strengthen support for their children's academic achievement.

Conclusion

The researcher conducted this study because the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community has a specific initiative on parent engagement, and because African Americans living in communities considered to be disenfranchised are often perceived to have limited interest and involvement in their children's education. The researcher is a product of one of those communities, and wanted to gain a greater understanding of the often misunderstood or unacknowledged efforts that African American parents made to support their children's academic achievement. This study revealed the beliefs and practices of African American parents regarding their children's academic achievement. The findings from this case study indicate that African American parents in the Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community care about their children's academics and engage in various ways to support their achievement. Additionally, the findings from the study indicate the importance of schools creating an intentional parent involvement framework to cultivate and foster the beliefs and efforts of African American parents.

APPENDIX A

PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please describe your educational background.
2. Where are you currently employed?
 - a. What is your job there?
3. How many children do you have in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools?
4. What is their grade level?
5. What activities, if any, do you participate in at your child's school?
 - a. Volunteering, PTA, school improvement team member, tutoring, mentoring, etc.?
6. Can you talk about a recent experience, if any, that you had interacting with teachers or administrators at the school?
 - a. What was that like for you?
7. What does it feel like interacting with staff at the school?
 - a. How comfortable do you feel going to your child's school?
 - b. What, if anything, makes you feel comfortable?
 - c. What, if anything, makes you feel uncomfortable?
8. Can you tell me about any experiences that you had during the time that you were in school?
9. Are you encouraged by the school staff to attend parent meetings and other parent activities?
 - a. (If yes) Can you tell me more about this?
10. What are some of your concerns and interests regarding your child and his/her education?
11. Are you encouraged to share your hopes and concerns for your child and for the school?
 - a. (If yes/no) Can you tell me more about that?
12. Are the parent-teacher meetings organized around your interests?
 - a. Can you tell me more about that?
13. Are parent meetings and activities scheduled at times that are convenient to you?
 - a. (If no) What would help make it more convenient for you?
14. How does the school staff communicate with you about school activities?

15. How often do they communicate with you (newsletters, conferences, phone calls, e-mails, flyers, websites, etc.)?
 - a. What kind of information does the school or teacher provide? Is it enough information?
 - b. Have you ever contacted the school? How often and for what reason?
 - c. Is it easy for you to find out how your child is doing academically in school?
16. What type of information would you like to receive from your school that would assist your child in reaching his/her goals?
17. What programs for parents, if any, do you think make a difference for your child?
 - a. E.g., programs that assist with helping with homework or extended learning programs or math and literacy curriculum nights)?
 - b. Can you talk about an experience you've had with any of these programs?
18. Does your school have a parent center and/or family advocate?
 - a. If so, what services are available through the parent center or family advocate?
19. What other services would you like to see the parent center or parent advocate offer?
20. What other activities would help your family to be more successful to reach their academic goals
 - a. E.g., computer classes, parenting classes, financial literacy classes, etc.?
21. Do you think the school needs to improve its efforts to get families involved?
 - a. (If yes) How can the school improve in its efforts to engage families?
22. What are some of the things that you do at home to support your child's education?
 - a. Why do you do these things?
 - b. How, if at all, has this changed over time?
23. What, if anything, gets in the way of your being more involved in your child's school?
 - a. What, if anything, can be done to change that?
24. How do you see yourself supporting your child's academic achievement in school?
 - a. What if anything would you do differently to support your child's academic achievement?

Probes:

1. Explain more about that.
2. What do you mean when you say _____?
3. Can you give me an example of _____?

APPENDIX B

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please describe your educational background.
2. Please describe your employment history.
3. At your school, how involved would you say the parents are in their children's education?
 - a. How do you know if parents are involved?
 - b. How, if at all, has parental involvement changed since you've been there?
4. What, if anything, do teachers do to encourage parents to be involved in their children's education?
5. What do you do to encourage parents getting involved?
6. What challenges do you face in getting parents involved at your school?
7. What challenges do teachers face in getting parents involved?
8. What resources do you think would make the biggest difference in increasing parent engagement at your school?
 - a. Is there anything else that would make a difference?

Probes:

1. Explain more about that.
2. What do you mean when you say _____?
3. Can you give me an example of _____?

APPENDIX C

PARENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. How involved do you think parents should be in their children's education?
2. How involved would you say you are in your children's education?
 - a. What kinds of things do you do to be involved?
 - b. How, if at all, has this changed over time?
3. What, if anything, gets in the way of your staying involved?
4. Do you think parents should get more involved in their children's education?
 - a. (If yes) What, if anything, do you think would help parents get more involved?
5. Has your child's school done anything to get parents involved?
 - a. Has this worked?
 - b. Can you tell me more about that?
6. What, if anything, do teachers do to involve you more in your child's education?
7. What does your principal do, if anything, to involve you more in your child's education?
8. What, if anything, do you think gets in the way of schools getting parents involved?
9. What resources, if any, would make the biggest difference in getting parents more involved at your child's school?
 - a. Is there anything else what would make a difference?

Probes:

1. Explain more about that.
2. What do you mean when you say _____?
3. Can you give me an example of _____?

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