

Abstract

Title of Dissertation: EXPLORING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN
PARENT INVOLVEMENT PRIORITIES,
POLICIES, PROGRAMS, AND PRACTICES

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Research connects parent involvement in education and student development, including achievement. However, less is known about how school staff determines programmatic priorities and practices about parent involvement. This study used a case study design to explore the development of parent involvement policy priorities, programs, and practices at an elementary school with a disproportionate amount of low-income students. The primary data sources are interviews conducted during the 2011-2012 school year; other data include an observation of an involvement activity and reviews of relevant documents. The data indicate that school staff implemented parent involvement structures dictated by the school district's central office, and staff supplemented those formal policies with their own unstructured activities. However, insufficient resources were dedicated to monitoring and analyzing parent involvement practices. This study describes the ways that school tradition, staff nostalgia, expectations about parent initiative, and staff's perceived lack of agency might contribute to weak parent involvement outcomes. It also questions some of the

assumptions about the purpose of parent involvement policies, especially in a high-stakes accountability environment.

EXPLORING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PARENT INVOLVEMENT
PRIORITIES, POLICIES, PROGRAMS, AND PRACTICES

By

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Families and schools have always been potentially strong partners with mutual interests in the wellbeing of the children who are in their care. Although there are many instances where schools and families cooperate effectively, their collaborations are sometimes dysfunctional. Lawson (2003) reported that parents often want school involvement to the extent that it furthers home and community goals. Conversely, teachers want parent involvement to the extent that it furthers school goals. Despite these possible conflicts, school and family goals can and often do overlap (Epstein, 1995; Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn & Van Voorhis, 2002). When this occurs, school and family partnerships can be effective mechanisms to socialize and educate children; they can also be areas of intense negotiations as staff and parents seek to clarify goals and at the same time protect other interests.

High-quality family and parent involvement programs facilitate schools' and families' recognition and cultivation of their common interests, such as their interest in creating safe, orderly, nurturing environments for children. One of the first steps in forming effective partnerships is the creation of policies that establish opportunities for school involvement. I examined an aspect of policies that the parent involvement research has not examined in great detail. Specifically, I investigated how school staff perceived the school's parent involvement policy and how the school's staff went about implementing it. I explored how parent involvement priorities were established, how policies were developed, the types of programs that were implemented at the school, and the kinds of practices employed by the staff.

The chapter is laid out in four sections. Following this introduction, I discuss the purpose of the study, including my research questions. Then I provide a brief overview of parent

involvement research as it relates to the study's conceptual framework. The final section provides operational definitions for key terms.

Purpose

Goetz and LeCompte (1984) suggest that researchers place studies on a continuum between “significant” and “trivial.” Significant studies, according to Goetz and LeCompte, add to the field both theoretically and practically. Studies contribute theoretically if they create new ways of thinking, revise current ideas, or reinforce current theories about a given topic. Studies are practically significant if they lead to application by their intended audience(s). This dissertation seeks to be both theoretically and practically significant; it adds to the existing parent involvement literature by examining in greater detail the relationship between priorities, policies, and practices. It also informs school personnel about the efficient (and inefficient) use of parent involvement resources. Finally, the dissertation examines central assumptions about policies that encourage parent involvement, particularly in the context of high-stakes accountability policies.

Education research presents parent involvement as a multifaceted, dynamic construct. Scholars have connected parent involvement to many school and student outcomes. What is less clear, however, are the ways school programs are developed and implemented. Less is known about how staff that serve different populations of parents employ and evaluate their parent involvement practices, as well as how they make sense of these practices in schools that serve low-income families and face challenges in meeting high-stakes accountability standards.

With this study, I sought to add to the body of knowledge about school staff's decisions pertaining to parent involvement. I specifically investigated how a school staff matriculated through the policy process, including evaluation. By interpreting parents' and school staff's

descriptions of parent involvement activities and studying the documents and stakeholder interactions in their natural contexts, I explain some connections and dis-connections between policy priorities, programs, and practices.

Schools can be busy, resource-strapped institutions. Based on local, state, and federal policies, schools are encouraged if not mandated to promote parent involvement (Epstein, et al., 2002; Maryland State Department of Education [MSDE], 2003; National PTA, 2000; Norton & Nufeld, 2002; Public Education Network [PEN], 2004). Parents likewise have busy lives and limited resources that they can invest in schools and their children's education. If schools are better informed about the policy development process, and factors that go into parents' decisions to become involved or not to become involved, then school staff members can better deploy resources to target parent involvement in desired ways. That does not mean, however, that invitations will lead directly to specific forms of involvement. The parent-school relationship is too complex to make such assertions, and there are inherent tensions within the policy environment which both promotes parent involvement and high-stakes accountability for student achievement.

Research Questions

Research indicates that most parents are involved in their children's education, though not always in ways understood or appreciated by principals and teachers (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Fan, 2001; Seyfried & Chung, 2002). When viewed through a school-centered lens, parents may not appear to provide active support for their child's education. Yet parent involvement can take on different looks at different schools due to the cultural expectations of the school community (Lareau & Shumar, 1996; National Center for Education Statistics

[NCES], 2003). Parents often describe involvement activities that are difficult for school personnel to observe or monitor, such as teaching their children the value of working hard for an education, providing for survival needs, and monitoring time spent watching television (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Fan, 2001).

This study delved deeper into the relationship between school staff's parent involvement priorities and practices. Scholars have understudied the involvement decisions of staff that serve low-income students. The research questions are meant to expand our understanding of how the staff at low-income schools encourages the involvement of low-income parents and how low-income parents interpret and respond to these efforts:

1. How does the staff of a low-income school form parent involvement priorities, policies, and programs? To what extent do policies such as Title I, Race to the Top, and No Child Left Behind influence the formation of parent involvement priorities, policies, and programs?
2. What types of parent involvement does the staff consider to be most important and why does it consider some forms of parent involvement more important than others? Does the staff have a collective vision of parent involvement?
3. How does the staff of a low-income school go about promoting different forms of parent involvement? What types of parent involvement invitations are made by school staff to parents?

4. Which types of parent involvement programs and practices does the staff deem effective?
What factors does the staff consider when evaluating the effects of programs and practices?

The focus of this study rests primarily on the perspectives of staff and their characterizations of the parents of children in a low-income school. Although the study attempted to identify and gather directly the perspectives of parents, I was unable to solicit sufficient participation of parents to warrant the claim that the study captures parent beliefs and perspectives. Rather the study examines staff characterizations of parent beliefs and actions, occasionally cross-examined by the direct responses of a few parents in the study. Nonetheless, these data provide a valuable perspective from which to understand how staff make sense of and respond to parent involvement initiatives and policies.

Conceptual Framework

Many scholars, such as Yin (2003) and Merriam (1998), strongly advocate the use of theoretical frameworks to identify research questions, support data collection, frame analysis, and supplement reporting. This section outlines three theories that frame the significance and purpose of the investigation: Epstein's Overlapping Spheres, Epstein's Six Types of Family and Community Involvement, and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's parent involvement model (HDS). In addition to serving as an impetus for the study, the concepts embedded in these three theories were used to shape data collection instruments and facilitate the analysis and interpretation of results. These theories convey the rudiments of a conceptual framework at the heart of this study.

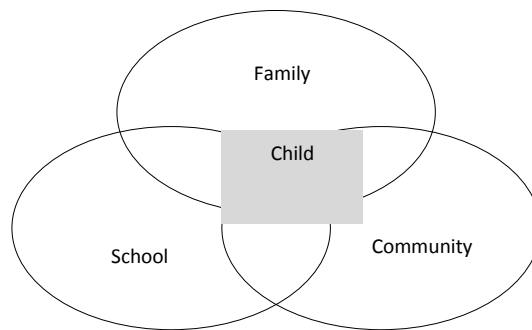
Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres. In the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner (1972) described the several life contexts that influence child development. His theory contends that systems that are physically and emotionally closer to children—immediate family, for instance—are more influential than those that are more distant—such as churches and schools. The relationship between these life contexts, however, is neither distinct nor static. Lightfoot (1978) states, “home and school more often appear as overlapping worlds with fuzzy boundaries, and much of the anxiety between parents and teachers seems to grow out of the ambiguities” (p. 26). Coleman (1987) emphasizes historic shifts that have influenced school-home boundaries as schools have become increasingly more responsible for family-like activities (e.g., nutrition, health care, and vocational decisions). Coleman's, Bronfenbrenner's, and Lightfoot's respective theories imply that while families and schools influence child development, the blending of roles across domains requires cooperation among stakeholders. In addition, the “fuzzy boundaries” described by each increases the difficulty that analysts experience in trying to determine the respective influences of families, schools, and communities on the social and cognitive development of children.

Epstein's (1995) theory of Overlapping Spheres includes aspects of Coleman's, Bronfenbrenner's, and Lightfoot's theories.¹ The theory of Overlapping Spheres can be construed as a three-circle Venn diagram (see Figure 1) that encompasses part of Bronfenbrenner's (1972; 1986) ecological systems model. The circles represent the influence of the family, community and school, respectively. The common element that all circles share is “children.” Children serve a boundary-spanning role between each of the three areas; children

¹ Although Epstein might not have explicitly attributed the development of her theory of Overlapping Spheres to either Coleman's, Bronfenbrenner's, or Lightfoot's ideas, there are clear connections between their ideas and Epstein's. For example, Lightfoot (1978) described schools and homes as spheres with fuzzy boundaries that overlap. Lightfoot also advocated for “consonance among family, school, and community cultures” (p.188) because all actors impact the student.

are simultaneously a focal point of—and the primary link between—each arena. Each area—community, school, and family—impacts the social, emotional, and academic development of children. No sphere dominates. According to Epstein, mutually supportive efforts of the three spheres produce the greatest and most positive effects on child development. Therefore, child outcomes are well served when the three areas operate in concert in ways that combine the best elements of each sphere while keeping the child’s best interest as the focus.

Figure 1. Epstein’s Theory of Overlapping Spheres



I used the Overlapping Spheres theory to point out the influence of family and school partnerships on student development and justify a focus on these partnerships as the purpose of this study. Overlapping Spheres theory provides a general framework from which to understand parent involvement that graphically displays the potential importance of partnerships. Schools, families, and communities must cooperate in order to have their greatest impact on the children for which they share responsibility.

The study emphasizes primarily the relationship between schools and parents, but I remained open to themes uncovered during data collection and analysis might lead to the further exploration of community factors that influence family-school partnerships. If school personnel and/or parents described the negative effects of limited resources, intense crime, or other obstacles associated with impoverished communities as a barrier to forming effective partnerships, I noted their observations. On the other hand, if stakeholders reported the positive impacts on the formation of partnerships due to the extra funding afforded to Title I schools, I noted their observations as well.

Epstein's Six Types of Family and Community Involvement. Joyce Epstein (1995) summarized the parent involvement literature through 1995 and presented her own theory and framework for the study of school, family, and community partnerships. The two main points derived from her review were that effective partnerships can be created intentionally, and six types of involvement were prominent in the literature: (1) Parenting, (2) Communicating, (3) Volunteering, (4) Learning at Home, (5) Decision-Making, and (6) Collaborating with the Community. Since 1995, Epstein has published several books and articles, but her descriptions of involvement remain true to these six types (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005).

The first dimension is *Parenting*. Parenting is the extent to which a child's home environment supports the child's success as a student. Epstein et al. (2002) describe parenting as caring for "children's health, safety, nutrition, and other topics of child and adolescent development, and home conditions that support students' education at each grade level" (p. 44). This type of support could take the form of provision of regular, nutritious meals; a quiet place to

study; or praise for educational achievements, all of which could take place in both the school and home locations. As with many aspects of parent involvement, schools and families might not have similar understandings of proper child and adolescent development. To that end, many schools offer parenting courses, health check-ups, and meals during the day.

Communication is the second dimension. Communication means schools and communities have two-way (or as many ways as necessary) discussions about school activities and student progress. In some cases, communication takes place between individual teachers and parents. Schools also exchange information with community members in broader ways, such as partnership teams comprised of representatives from various stakeholder groups that develop, implement, and monitor activities designed to increase parent involvement in ways that support student success. Communication can also cultivate mutual understanding and build a cooperative rapport among stakeholders. For example, teacher phone calls to parents can be used to “encourage families to provide reactions, ideas, and preferences and to ask questions about school programs and children’s progress” (Epstein et al., p. 47).

The third strand of family and community involvement is *Volunteering*. Volunteering is a typical form of involvement whereby schools invite, recruit, and train volunteers to provide goods and/or services to schools and their students. It can take place within or outside of the school building. Volunteers perform tasks such as cafeteria aides, classroom assistants, and after-school tutors. Epstein et al. (2002) believe that volunteer activities demonstrate good intentions from both parents and schools, respectively. In Epstein and colleague’s opinion, the volunteers’

presence tells students, faculty, and the community that parents care about the quality of the school and the success of all students.

By organizing and training volunteers to assist in many ways and

in many locations, educators convey that parents and others are welcome and that their time and talents are valued. (p. 51)

The fourth kind of family and community involvement, *Learning at Home*, is similar to *Parenting*. Learning at Home describes how families help their children with curriculum-related issues, such as homework or studying. Academic activities can be more than just helping with homework and projects; parents can provide direct instruction to their children, facilitate conversations about school days, and take children on trips of academic benefit such as museums or zoos. Epstein et al. (2002) recommend that schools provide information to parents that parents would find useful in performing learning at home activities.

The final two types of family and community involvement, *Decision Making* and *Collaboration with the Community*, describe practices that encourage involvement in the operation of schools. Decision making is how well the school involves the community stakeholders in the decision making process. This category goes beyond trivial decisions, such as determining start times of meetings or school colors and includes decisions such as curricula and staffing. Decision making commonly takes the form of parents as members of Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs) or school governance councils. Epstein et al. (2002) contend that the provision of decision making opportunities enables the creation of school policies and practices that develop from a more diverse set of perspectives. Moreover, decisions generated with input from a broader constituency might engender more stakeholder ownership in school performance.

Collaboration with the Community is the final type of community involvement Epstein describes. In this strand of community involvement, schools use an asset-based approach to communities. Schools identify and use community resources to enhance school and familial practices that affect student success. While collaborating with the community may be a worthy

community engagement goal, there has been little research about how this form of involvement influences parents' decisions to get involved in other ways.

Some scholars contend that Epstein's (and similar) efforts to study and improve community involvement in school are overly school-centered, overlook the diversity of interests among stakeholders, and disregard the way that unequal power relationships often breed conflicts (Mahwinney, 1998; Shutz, 2006). Lareau (1987) and Weiss, Fine, and Lareau (1992) claim that individual families possess various levels of social networks and other resources that affect their respective inclinations and abilities to involve themselves with schools. For example, if school processes and curricula tacitly value traditionally White, middle class knowledge and behaviors, then affluent White families are more likely to feel comfortable being in the school building and being involved in school activities (Delpit, 1995; Mediratta & Fruchter, 2003; Wells & Serna, 1996). Further, privileged families are more likely to partner with like-minded families to exert influence on school activities, practices, and policies. Abrams and Gibbs' (2002) study of mothers in an urban elementary PTO revealed that the PTO's members participated in exclusionary practices regarding other parents in part based on the socioeconomic standing of its members. Abrams and Gibbs (2002) found that it was not possible to understand parent involvement without understanding the

underlying struggles for voice and representation among social class and ethnocultural groups...in which larger societal struggles concerning education, language, and allocations of scarce resources are enacted, debated, and potentially transformed in a larger interplay between the school and an array of human actors.
(p. 399)

These critics argue that involvement policies based on the Six Types of Community Involvement identified by Epstein are too broad, simplistic, and school-centered to account for the socioeconomic disparities that accompany the diversity of school populations. In order to affect family involvement and student growth in an inclusive fashion, critics argue that schools must work with community partners to address the social and political inequities that exist among their constituents (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007; Mahwinney, 1998).

Although there is merit to the argument that parent involvement cannot be fully understood without understanding the racial and socioeconomic context in which schools solicit involvement, there is nothing inherent about Epstein's taxonomy that precludes such an analysis. Epstein's framework has proven to be a reasonable tool for researchers and policymakers because it is broad enough to encompass most kinds of parent involvement, yet descriptive enough to focus attention on specific forms of involvement and specific populations of families. In addition, the Six Types of Family and Community Partnerships model has been adopted by the National PTA, *No Child Left Behind*, and the National Network of Partnership Schools, making the model a policy-relevant framework by which to examine the involvement of low-income families. As a result, I used Epstein's framework for the purposes of this study, but I also examined staff descriptions of parents' engagement in these forms of involvement within the context of relevant social and cultural factors that influence them.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's Model of Parent Involvement Decision Making.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995; 1997) build upon the socio-psychological research that Bronfenbrenner, Coleman, and Epstein address in their theories. However, instead of pointing out the important influence of parents on child development (Bronfenbrenner, Epstein), the

increased family-like responsibilities of schools (Coleman), and the ways parents partner with schools (Epstein), Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler focus on the reasons parents choose to become involved with their child's education and schools. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of parent involvement decision making (see Figure 2) provides a useful perspective from which to view how low-income parents make decisions about involvement.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's commentary interprets parent involvement choices partly through the lens of Bandura's personal efficacy theory. In terms of parent involvement, personal efficacy theory argues that parents make choices about how—if at all—to be involved with their children's education partly based on their beliefs about how effective they can be in an educational support role. In addition to a sense of self-efficacy, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler suggest that parental involvement choices depend on parental perceptions of their educational roles and involvement opportunities offered by children and school staff. Parental role construction is defined by what parents believe are their rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the education of their children. In addition to beliefs, role construction encompasses how parents behave with respect to the education of their children. In general, the more efficacious parents feel and the more they believe that they are responsible for some aspect of their child's education, the more likely they are to engage in that form of involvement. These decisions about involvement may be prompted by general or specific invitations from children and schools.

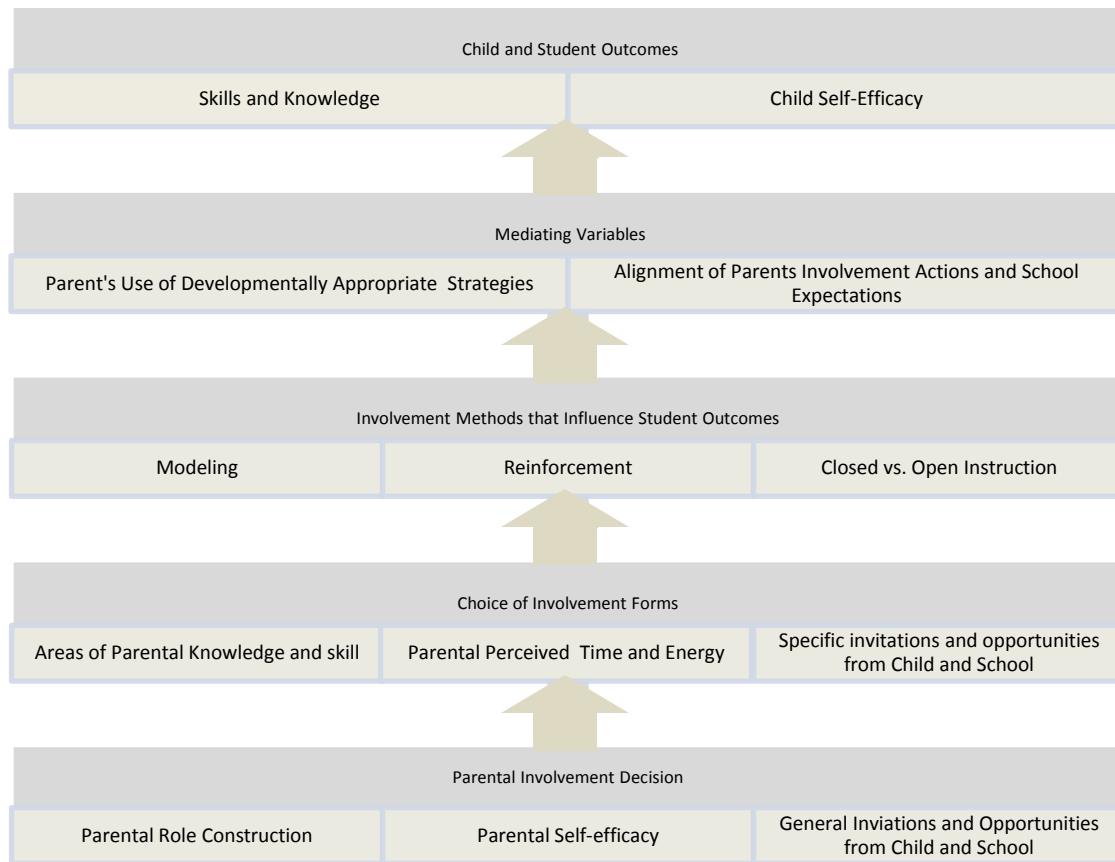


Figure 2. The Original Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Parent Involvement Decision Model (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; 1997)

Figure 2 provides a “backward map” for how parent involvement can influence child and student outcomes. The figures describe the steps between influencing outcomes and an initial decision by parents to be involved. According to the authors, parent involvement can influence educational outcomes for children by modeling, reinforcement, and direct instruction (third row), and the influence of these factors are mediated by parents’ choice of developmentally appropriate strategies and action alignment with schools (second row). When parents model the importance of education, their behaviors demonstrate the high priority the family gives to school functions. Modeling behaviors include communicating with teachers (e.g., attendance at parent-teacher conference), leisure reading at home, or volunteering to help with school activities (e.g., PTA participation). Reinforcement is similar to modeling but differs in that parents show the

importance of school success by positively rewarding (e.g., verbal praising) behaviors such as respecting teachers or working hard on school projects. Instruction in the home context is similar to teaching in the classroom. Parents may teach children methods for solving problems, practice spelling words and math facts, and provide academic tips. If parents model, reinforce, and instruct in ways that are aligned with school expectations, Hoover-Dempsey and Sander predict that students' skills, knowledge, and self-efficacy will increase.

The bottom two rows of Figure 2 display the focus of this study. Parental role construction, parental self-efficacy, and invitations are key determinants of parent decisions about whether to get involved (the bottom row). Other factors influence how these decisions are manifested in the forms of involvement in schools that parents choose (the fourth row). This perspective on parent involvement raises a number of important questions. For example, how do Title I school staff solicit parent involvement? How do additional factors, such as parent role construction, general sense of parental efficacy, resources, and school leadership influence staff decisions about parent involvement? This study attempted to use these and similar questions to examine the decision variables that staff use as they understand and attempt to shape parent involvement practices.

Relatively few researchers have explicitly examined each component of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model, but many studies provide evidence that supports the model's core concepts. The importance of role construction, general self-efficacy, and perceived life context (time, energy, knowledge and skills) associated with specific forms of involvement, and the nature of invitations from schools and children are common themes in the parental involvement literature. Although I also do not examine all aspects of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model, I argue that role construction, general self-efficacy, perceived life context, and the nature

of school invitations provide an informative window into how school staff and parents understand parent involvement policies. Moreover, I argue that how staff perceive parent roles, parent efficacy and parent life context also influences the nature of invitations and opportunities that staff offers to parents. I discuss each of these themes next.

Parental role construction. Parental role construction is defined by what parents believe are their rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the education of their children. In addition to beliefs, role construction encompasses how parents behave with respect to the education of their children. These beliefs and actions describe how parents see their responsibilities and help to shape their motivation regarding involvement.

A number of studies have linked parents' beliefs about education to their willingness to get involved in different aspects of schools. Overstreet, Devine, Bevans and Effreom (2005) noted that parent involvement was positively related to parents' educational aspirations for themselves and their children. Drummond and Stipek (2004) interviewed an ethnically diverse sample that also reinforced the importance of role construction. The researchers identified positive correlations between parent beliefs that they should help their children with schoolwork and provide helping behaviors. Similarly, Cooper, Jackson, Nye and Lindsay (2001) reported that elementary school parents' positive attitudes toward homework led to greater parental involvement with homework completion and better student grades.

Other studies, however, have noted that parents' beliefs about education are often based on family experiences with schools. In her review of parent involvement studies, Trotman (2001) noticed that many African-American parents believed that their educational involvement ended at the schoolhouse door. Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel's (2001) research suggests that

parents' experiences with schools and their own parents' relationships with schools (i.e., the parent-school relationships of children's grandparents) influence parents' expectations about parental involvement. If families have had a history of poor experiences with schools, their role construction tends to be narrower with greater responsibility for their children's education delegated to the schools. If, on the other hand, families have had a more positive history of experiences with schools, their role construction tends to be broader.

Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) also found that parental role construction was a key to parental involvement. While acknowledging the complexity of the construct, they argued that parents' understanding of their responsibilities can be altered through participation in parent training programs. Before attending a parent training program, parents in their study reportedly viewed their responsibilities as mainly supervising homework, reading to children, and maintaining survival needs (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, etc.). Following the program, parents expressed the need to proactively communicate with school staff and implement more "teaching" at home. Participation in the program presumably broadened parents' role construction of how they should be involved in schools and their children's education.

Parental self-efficacy. Research suggests that parental self-efficacy is another important element in parents' involvement decisions. The self-efficacy theory contends that parents are more likely to be involved if they believe they can affect their children's education in positive ways. As is the case with role construction, a number of studies have examined how self-efficacy influences parent involvement. Lareau and Shumar (1996) contend that "family-school policies generally side-step the issue of parent's differential educational skills. Similarly, the policies tend

to ignore the potential negative impacts on parents' respective dignities and authorities in their homes by unmasking their limited educational skills" (p. 26).

In their study of the parents and teachers of more than 200 elementary school students, Drummond and Stipek (2004) interviewed few parents that described low self-efficacy as a concern. Balli et al.'s (1998) study revealed that parents who wanted to help their children with homework would like the support of a training workshop and/or "homework hotline" to help them develop their knowledge and skills. Sheldon and Epstein (2002) found that schools with more activities designed to develop parental knowledge—about school goals, parenting behaviors, and learning at home—reported less discipline problems with students in schools. According to Anderson et al. (1995), highly effective involvement programs explicitly target parental understanding of school curricula and related activities.

The research on parent self-efficacy as it pertains to parent involvement is analogous to the entire body of parent involvement literature; the research is encouraging, but not rigorous enough to make an air-tight case about positive connections between parents' self-efficacy and involvement. Survey studies, such as those conducted by Overstreet et al. (2005) and Cooper et al. (2001), are the most robust quantitative designs that the self-efficacy strand of the parent involvement literature has to offer; but these studies use inconsistent metrics for parent involvement. On the other hand, qualitative designs often provide adequate descriptions of parent reports, but the studies tend to use small samples, cover relatively short periods of time, and sometimes fail to consider rival interpretations. Because much of the literature that relates to parent involvement and self-efficacy is suggestive and not conclusive, one can draw defensible arguments about the positivity of their relationship, but not direct connections between self-efficacy and its effects on parent involvement.

Perceived life context. As stated earlier, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995) research implied that parents decide if they should be involved in specific forms with their children's education based on parental role construction, self-efficacy, and general invitations for involvement. Once parents decide to become involved with their children's education, evidence suggests that many parents do *what they think they can* to help. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parent involvement describes "what parents think they can do" as the parents' "perceived life context" (Walker, et al., 2005, p. 96). Perceived life context is a phrase that encompasses three domains: skills and knowledge, time, and energy (Green, et al., 2007; Walker, et al., 2005).

The combination of skills and knowledge is close to the category of self-efficacy; but a parent's perception is what differentiates the two concepts. Green et al. (2007) point out that

individuals with the same level of skills and knowledge may perform differently given variations in personal efficacy beliefs about what one can do with that set of skills and knowledge...inclusion of skills and knowledge in the model suggests that parents are motivated to engage in involvement activities if they believe they have skills and knowledge that will be helpful in specific domains of involvement activity. (p. 534)

Likewise, the availability of time and/or energy can be a matter of perception. Two fathers could work full-time at the same place, and all other variables could be comparable (e.g., number of children, marriage, health, level of education, etc.). One of those fathers might claim to be too exhausted to attend an evening PTA meeting or help with a science project, while the

other parent might push through his fatigue in order to support his child in ways he deems effective.

There are examples of perceived life context woven into the parent involvement literature. For instance, some parents contend that while they might have the inclination and ability to help with homework, a lack of child care hinders their ability to attend school functions such as parent-teacher conferences and PTA meetings (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). Others describe how employment responsibilities, such as second jobs, make it difficult for parents to help at home with activities such as helping with homework or school projects (Chin & Newman, 2002). Also, if a parent is less proficient in English than his or her child, then reading at bed time, checking homework, or exchanging notes with teachers might be even more challenging (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2001).

Data are mixed in regard to the influence of perceived life circumstances on parent involvement in education. For instance some research describes how potential factors for parent involvement decisions, such as single parenthood or full-time employment, impact parent involvement (Chinn & Newman, 2001), while another study might not uncover any significant connections between single parenthood and parent involvement (Fields-Smith, 2005). Lareau's (1987) data imply that parents' class and resources affect parents' involvement choices. On the other hand, Anderson and Minke (2007) reported that resources were unrelated to involvement decisions.

Still other research about life context appears intuitively true. For example, Green and Hoover-Dempsey (2007) looked at parents who decided to homeschool their children. The parents, according to the information gained from the study's perceived life context scale,

determined that they had the skills, knowledge, time, and energy to homeschool, which they identified as the best way to educate their respective children.

Although the research pertaining to perceived life context is not conclusive, it makes intuitive sense that such factors influence parents' responses to school invitations. Parents that participated described some life factors during interviews, and I weighed the impact of these factors on parents' descriptions of school invitations during data collection and analysis.

School invitations for parent involvement. According to Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues (Green et al, 2007; Green & Hoover-Dempsey 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Walker, et al. 2005), the effectiveness of invitations from children and schools are contingent upon other factors, including role construction, self-efficacy, time and energy, and specific skills and knowledge. For example, if parents have a narrow construction of their role and low self-efficacy, Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues contend that even the best invitations for involvement will yield minimal results.

Despite the conditional importance of invitations suggested by the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model, the topic of invitations and involvement opportunities have received considerable attention in the literature (Lareau & Shumar, 1997; Trotman, 2001). In Deslandes and Bertrand's (2005) and Anderson and Minke's (2007) studies, parents characterized the nature of invitations as significantly important to their choices about if and how to be involved; Van Voorhis (2003) reported that outreach was a key to getting families involved with homework; and Overstreet et al.'s (2005) interviews of 159 K-12 parents indicated that parent perceptions of school receptivity are among the strongest predictors of parent involvement. Many of the students and families interviewed by Balli et al. (1998) suggested that parents would be more likely to engage

with homework if teachers made suggestions about it and workshops provided access to the necessary skills and knowledge. The sample, however, was all Caucasian, middle-class parents so it is uncertain whether these results are representative of most schools across the country and Title 1 schools in particular.

Another uncertain aspect of invitations is how the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model differentiates between the effects of different types of invitations. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's involvement model claims that general invitations from school persuade parents to become involved, but specific invitations influence parents to become involved in particular ways. While the model's view of the impact of types of invitations is intuitive, there is not a large database that substantiates the claim. Only a handful of studies have analyzed parent involvement in a manner that considered the impact of invitations. For instance, Anderson and Minke (2007) and Deslandes and Bertand (2005) surveyed parents and found that school invitations for involvement were related to parent involvement behaviors.

Research continues to support the theory that parents make involvement decisions partly based on parents' perceptions of their roles vis-à-vis their children's education, their ability to positively affect their children's educational outcomes (e.g., general self-efficacy, time and energy, specific knowledge and skills), and the quality of solicitation of involvement from their children and local schools. Although Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler combine these elements (role construction, self-efficacy, time and energy, specific knowledge and skills, and invitations) in an effort to gain a more complete picture of parents' involvement decisions, the picture remains relatively limited, in part because of the quantitative focus of most of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler-oriented studies. The literature review that follows this chapter points out the "monomethod bias" (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007, p. 282) and the psychological and

survey-oriented slant of prior studies (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997); in this review I argue that this bias restricts our understanding of the factors that influence parents' decisions about involvement.

The Hoover-Dempsey model and school staff. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) theorized about parents' involvement decisions; and the empirical literature contains substantive evidence to support their theory. There is not verification, on the other hand, of whether school staff perspectives affect parent involvement outcomes. What if one substituted "staff" for "parent in the model?" Could school staff also be affected by the same variables: 1) role construction, 2) perceived life context, and 3) responses to invitations? For instance, *staff role construction* could be viewed as the staff's opinion of parent and school responsibilities. The variable of *staff perceived life circumstances* might be the sense of overwhelm staff experience as they grapple with issues of class size, standardization of curricula, high-stakes testing, and school climate. Perhaps *invitations* could be analogous to how staff perceive parents' responses to staff overtures pertaining to involvement. This study was developed, in part, on the assumption that the role of staff perspectives about parent involvement be investigated further.

The empirical support for Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model for parent involvement, along with the speculation about the how the model might be applied to school staff, assist in the framing of this dissertation. The focus of this study is on how school staff prioritize, implement, and evaluate parent involvement practices. One could view staff choices through the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model and investigate if school staff base their involvement choices, at least in part, on four questions (see the row titled, Choice of Involvement Forms):

- 1) *To what extent are parents responsible and capable for helping their children in school?*
- 2) *How do parents respond to our involvement invitations?*
- 3) *How much time, energy, and funding do we have for parent involvement activities?*
- 4) *In what ways, if at all, do my school district and principal desire us to prioritize, implement, and evaluate parent involvement activities?*

Each question provides some insights into the decisions that staff make about involvement and how to respond to conditions within their buildings and the surrounding communities.

This section of the paper presented three theories that undergird the framework of this dissertation. Epstein's theory of Overlapping Spheres describes the collective influence of three mutually-interested parties—parents, schools, and communities—on student development; Epstein's Six Types of Family and Community Involvement establishes an involvement typology to which invitations might be connected usefully; and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model describes a series of factors that influence staff's and parents' decisions about parent involvement. The next section of the paper presents operational definitions for key terms of the study.

Definitions of Terms

Family and community involvement is a well-known school improvement tool. However, involvement, like many other terms, is defined differently by stakeholders in the educational

literature (Jeynes, 2003; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Trotman, 2001). This section defines several key terms as used in the study.

- a. *Parent involvement* in education is a caretaker's participation in their child's social, emotional, and intellectual development as it relates to the child's education. Such involvement may take place outside or within the school building. Forms of parent involvement documented in the literature include helping children with homework, involvement with a parent teacher organization (PTO) and school governance councils, attending school functions such as parent-teacher conferences, volunteering in the school, fundraising, reading to children, and engaging children in educational discussions (Balli et al., 1998; Cooper, Jackson, Nye & Lindsay, 2001; Desimone, 1999; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; McNeal, 1999; Shutz, 2006).

- b. *School staff* members include teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and secretaries.

- c. *Low-income parents* refers to parents with children that are enrolled in schools that receive Title I funds from the federal government (those in which poor children comprise at least 40 percent of enrollment) or have higher than average enrollments of students receiving free and reduced meals services. The study focused on a Title I school in a metropolitan school district on the east coast of the United States.

- d. *Primary grades* are school grades between Kindergarten and second grade.
- e. *Intermediate grades* are school grades between third grade and sixth grade.
- f. *Invitations* are solicitations for parental involvement. Sometimes schools, and/or the children therein, make direct invitations to parents. For example, teachers often contact parents via telephone to ask for volunteers or help with student discipline. Invitations may be generic as well. For instance, school newsletters might describe upcoming events or curricula content. Communications such as newsletters and flyers increase parents' awareness of school activities and theoretically allow parents to involve themselves in ways that schools have not traditionally recognized.

This definition does not imply that all invitations possess a positive connotation; nor are all invitations, as defined in this dissertation, viewed as requests for voluntary parent behaviors. In some cases, school staff contact parents for negative reasons with the understanding that parent “must” become involved in particular ways. For instance, an assistant principal might call a parent to set up a face-to-face meeting because a student got into a fight in school and is being suspended. In this circumstance, the parent might feel compelled to communicate with the administrator. Although the school called and the parent subsequently became involved, this kind of invitation can seem more like a mandate. This study assumes that the tension created by violations of school policy and unbalanced power relationships between staff and parents exists at

every school. Still, if the school makes the first contact, this dissertation considers it an invitation.

This section provided operational definitions for key vocabulary of the study. The next chapter presents a review of the research on parent involvement in order to demonstrate the need for further exploration of the relationship between policy priorities, staff decision making, and parent involvement practices.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Current and past research indicates that parent involvement is a critical component of children's intellectual, social, and emotional development. The following section reviews some of the literature connecting parent involvement and outcomes related to schools.

Parent Involvement and Student Development

Before 1982, the extant literature on parent involvement in school was not often published in refereed journals. Parent involvement writing was essentially sequestered in books compiled by interested editors or reports to interested audiences (Epstein, 1995). Nonetheless, some authors received wide-spread recognition as they began to stretch the links of educational success beyond the realm of the schoolhouse.

Federal legislation passed in the 1960s and 1970s such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975 (IDEA) mandated that schools communicate with the parents of some of their students; during that same period, research such as the Coleman Report of 1966 began to emphasize the influence that family background had on students' academic performances. Parent involvement was a natural offshoot of the investigation of those factors. Parents' effect on student and school performance became the focus of several books and reports in the decades following ESEA, IDEA, and the Coleman Report (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lightfoot, 1978). However, the study of parent involvement in education was not accepted by mainstream academia until more recently, as evidenced by parent involvement literature going unpublished in prominent academic journals until the early 1980s.

The earliest peer-reviewed parent involvement article uncovered in this review was *Teachers' Reported Practices of Parent Involvement: Problems and Possibilities* (1982) by Epstein and Becker. This article ushered in a new era of the parent involvement literature by moving it into the arena of recognized scholarly research. It was during this period that authors who relied on opinions, anecdotes and isolated cases began to place greater emphasis on grounding themselves empirically.

In the 1980s, parent involvement moved closer toward the mainstream of research. Peer-reviewed journals and other prominent publications such as *Teachers College Record* and *Phi Delta Kappan* began to publish parent involvement articles more regularly. The field grew immensely in terms of the number, if not quality, of articles. In addition to adding more case studies and ethnographies to the field of knowledge, scholars created frameworks by which parent involvement theoretically operated. By the 1990s, parent involvement scholars began to make more explicit connections to student achievement (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Research has uncovered correlations between student behavior and parent involvement. Where parent involvement has been evident, scholars have found improvements in discipline (in terms of office referrals and suspensions), truancy, homework completion, and attendance (Boethel, 2003; Hayes & Comer, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Sheldon and Epstein's (2002) study showed that family and community volunteer opportunities reduced referrals and detentions; parent education activities also reduced detentions; and staff communications with home decreased in-school suspensions. Domina (2005) identified positive links between parent involvement and student behavior as well; but the researcher also described increasing ambiguity of effects when factors such as race and socioeconomic status are included in the analysis. McNeal (1999) and Fan (2001) reached similar conclusions and pointed out the heavy emphasis

on teacher perception in many behavioral situations. McNeal pointed out the varying correlations of parent involvement with cognitive student achievement metrics, such as homework accuracy, report card grades, and test scores.

The literature pertaining to parent involvement is replete with studies that demonstrate positive associations between parent involvement and teacher-reported indicators of student achievement such as report card grades. Some scholars contend that report-card grades are heavily based on teachers' perceptions, and therefore are swayed by teachers' views of parents' involvement with their respective children (Seyfried & Chung, 2002). In other words, teachers could be more likely to give better grades to students whose parents are more involved. For instance, Cooper, Jackson, Nye and Lindsay's (2001) research suggests teacher reports are positively related to the degree parents are perceived to support homework. State, district, and national test scores, some speculate, might provide a more impartial judge of the involvement-achievement connection. For instance Desimone (1999) found that parent involvement variables were better predictors of grades than test scores across all race and income groups. She supposed that involved parents might sway the grades that teachers give to students.

In terms of standardized test scores, several researchers have investigated the relationship between student test performance and parent involvement and the results have been mixed (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In many cases, school-centered parent involvement—involvement in which partners ostensibly focus on goals that target school needs rather than the needs of families or the local school community—correlates with positive test outcomes. Sheldon and Epstein (2005), for example, found that family, school, and community partnership practices were related to an increase in math scores. Also, Sheldon (2003) discovered that school outreach

to families and communities positively related to student increases on writing, reading, math, social studies, and science tests.

On the other hand, investigators have also found negative relationships between parent involvement and some achievement indicators (Desimone, 1999; McNeal, 1999). In addition, the data collection methods in most studies are colored by perception, because they are typically reported by parents, teachers, and/or students (Fan, 2001). However, the majority of studies have indicated positive correlations between parent involvement and student success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Types of Parent Involvement in Education

As stated earlier, the phrase “parent involvement” is a catchall term with varying definitions by scholars and laypeople alike. Equally varied are the types of parent involvement that authors describe in educational research. The following sections presents three parent involvement typologies—ranging from two types of involvement to 39 types of involvement—that are representative of the body of literature.

De Gaetano (2007) describes parent involvement in more general terms. She labels parent participation in education as either *formal* or *informal*.

Informal participation includes providing quiet workspaces, discussing school activities, and discussing television viewing. Also, parents might add “mind-jogging” strategies when performing common activities such as shopping for groceries, making meals, or sorting laundry (De Gaetano, 2007).

Formal participation includes volunteering in classrooms (tutoring, distributing papers, constructing bulletin boards, making books, reading to children), lunchrooms, and on fieldtrips.

For instance, a Latino parent who was not literate in Spanish or English, taught children how to crochet as an enrichment activity connected to a teacher's lesson connecting crochet squares and multiplication.

Formal participation can also have positive effects beyond the school. Some parents reported that the skills they learned and the confidence they acquired while working in schools helped the parents to become change agents in their communities. For example, a group of parents advocated for a street light outside of the school (De Gaetano, 2007).

Fan (2001) studied the NELS: 88 data and found 39 types of parent involvement that were reported by either parents (25) or students (14). Some of the involvement types included parental aspirations for what grade or degree level the student would complete in education, or the types of television-watching rules families implemented. Fan's study, however, examined the relationship between reported parent involvement and student achievement growth, so it is not surprising that his research shed no light on the relationship between school invitations and parent involvement.

Joyce Epstein's (1995) aforementioned typology of what she and her colleagues label "family and community" involvement that—in terms of numbers of types—rests between dichotomous typologies such as De Gaetano's and fragmented typologies such as Fan's. Also, Epstein's broad and descriptive categories have adopted by the National PTA, No Child Left Behind, and dozens of parent involvement studies conducted in the last decade. Thus, Epstein's typology proved useful in the study.

Parent Perceptions of Parent Involvement

Empirical evidence indicates that most parents want to help their children do well in school, and parents are actively involved in their children's educations (Chin & Newman, 2002). However, when viewed through a school-centered lens, they may not appear to be. In many cases, some parents describe involvement activities that often go unnoticed by school personnel, such as teaching their children the value of working hard for an education, providing for survival needs, and monitoring time spent watching television (Fan, 2001).

Parents' "perceived life circumstances" are a primary impact on the parents' involvement choices (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; O'Connor, 2001; Walker et al., 2005). Life circumstances include parents' senses of academic self-efficacy, children's wants and needs, time, and energy. Some parents, particularly minority parents, describe uncomfortable, confrontational and distrustful relationships with schools. They portray their schools as uninviting, tense and formal (Halsey, 2005; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006). The closed-door nature of schools as perceived by some parents discourages the formal, traditional involvement ostensibly sought by school personnel.

Sometimes parents believe their jobs begin and end at the schoolhouse door (Trotman, 2001). Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) ethnographically studied the impact of a parent education program on Latino immigrants in a small California city. Parents expressed their roles in their respective children's education. Before the education program, parents said their roles were supervising homework, managing student attendance, reading to students, attending school functions, and providing for student survival needs; all of which were traditional forms of involvement. After the sessions, parents' opinions of involvement included a more active role in contacting school staff, and more positive and supportive "teaching" at home. It is important to

note that the study did not measure parents' levels of activity; it only reported the expressed understanding of parental responsibilities. The authors conclude that parental role construction is a complex construct, and parents' procedural knowledge can be as important as declarative knowledge. In other words, sometimes essential knowledge is not just academic, but social.

Barriers to the Involvement of Minority and Poor Parents

Research suggests that differences in race and/or socioeconomic status might be associated with differential effects of—and motivations for—parent involvement; and as Leistyna (2002) observed, issues of

social class (which includes a hierarchy of employment status), age, sexuality, religion, language, gender, race, and so on ...act as boundaries between school personnel and parents dramatically affect the ways in which people are actually able to participate in the educational process. (pg. 5)

Beothel (2003) presented a clear categorization of the barriers to minority parent involvement. Her analysis of the parent involvement literature revealed that

hindrances to [poor and minority] family involvement tend to fall into one of six major categories: (1) contextual factors; (2) language barriers; (3) cultural beliefs regarding appropriate roles for parents, teachers, and students; (4) families' lack of understanding of U.S. schools; (5) families' lack of knowledge about how to help their children with homework; and (6) issues of exclusion and discrimination. (pg. 42)

Contextual factors are parents' "perceived life circumstances" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; O'Connor, 2001; Walker et al., 2005) as they relate to the parents' abilities to help their children. As stated earlier, a parent's beliefs about his or her time, financial wealth, energy, and opportunity, are examples of such factors. For instance, if a parent thinks he or she is unwelcome in a school, then he or she might be less inclined to attend school functions (Halsey, 2005). Also, parents with multiple children in the same school building could become overwhelmed with attending school performances and parent-teacher conferences, chaperoning trips, volunteering in classrooms, or purchasing supplies. Some parent involvement advocates have suggested that schools implement strategies—such as providing childcare, making home visits for conferences, and making personal invitations—to mitigate the impact of contextual factors (Trotman, 2001).

Language discrepancies are another obstacle in the path of involvement of some parents (particularly those that are recent immigrants) in schools. Schools often communicate to parents through writing (Halsey, 2005). Parents with limited reading proficiency might be less likely to receive the information necessary to make timely, informed decisions about how they could impact the educations of their children. Limited reading proficiency is not solely the domain of non-English speaking families. In fact, parents who speak English well might have difficulty reading as well.

In addition, parents with limited English proficiency might have trouble with activities such as parent-teacher conferences, field trips, school leadership team meetings, and parent-teacher organization meetings. Schools try to overcome language barriers by providing communications in more than one language or calling homes with automated messages, among other strategies.

Boethel (2003) also calls attention to the impact of cultural beliefs on minority parent involvement in schools. School instructional and administrative staffs tend to be from White, middle-class backgrounds; and several theorists contend that White, middle-class parents tend to have an advantage—relative to minority and poor parents—with respect to school parent-school interactions (De Gaetano, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Grayson & Martin, 2001; Lareau, 1987; Mediratta & Fruchter, 2003; Newman, 2002; Wells & Serna, 1996), perhaps because the White, middle class parents and school staffs have similar expectations for communication and behavior. After interviewing a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of parents and observing parent involvement, Abrams and Gibbs (2002) concluded that some White, upper-middle class parents were “highly familiar with the dominant language of education and have established strong relationships with the teachers and the principal” (p. 391) which appeared to provide the elite parents with more influence than some of the other parents that were involved with the school.

Some research indicates that minority parents sometimes report that the parental responsibility for formal education is to send healthy children to school. Parents, particularly minority parents, at times describe education as something that is accomplished in school with a teacher, and therefore do not try to help their children with extra support at home (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Trotman, 2001).

The misalignment between families’ and schools’ understandings of their respective practices and knowledge is another obstruction to full parent involvement in schools, according to Boethel (2003). In some cases, parents’ previous experiences in schools suggest that parents are not welcome in the schoolhouse. In other situations, school staffs might feel that parents’ lack of formal education makes them unfit to assist with academic issues such as tutoring or

homework help. For instance, during interviews with Quioco and Daoud (2006), teachers described parents as unskilled, illiterate and disinterested in helping their children with school.

As Beothel (2003) points out, the cultural “mismatch” of beliefs, knowledge, and understandings—from the parents’ and schools’ perspectives, respectively—impedes parent involvement in schools. Many schools combat this cultural misunderstanding and lack of awareness by providing parent training courses and staff cultural sensitivity courses (Chadwick, 2004; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Lawson, 2003).

Similar to the hurdles caused by cultural mismatches, issues of race, class, and power manifest in ways that sometimes block minority and impoverished parent involvement as well. Beothel (2003) highlighted several instances of this “exclusion and discrimination” in her review of the literature. However, other researchers have observed discriminatory phenomena as well. Leistyna (2002) presents such a case.

Leistyna (2002) documented the origin and operation of one district’s multicultural steering committee charged with creating a community curriculum. The group’s purpose was ostensibly positive because it originated out of an effort to improve issues such as de facto school segregation, high minority drop-out rates, and “cultural strife.” The group set out to create school-community partnerships to address critical issues. However, the committee members were the arbiters of issue importance. The process of issue determination was one of several instances of unequal power relationships and school-centeredness that likely kept the committee from reaching its stated goal.

Adults are “mediating structures” that bridge the home and school environments (Gonzales et al., 2001; Moll et al., 1992). Both parent and teacher perceptions play significant roles in the treatment, and subsequent development of the children they share (Cooper et al.,

2001; Epstein, 1985; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Honig et al., 2001; Kirk & Goon, 1975; Seyfried & Chung, 2002; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). This section described perceptions of parent roles in education through the lens of extant research. The review suggests the roles of families in formal schooling, according to educators, are multifaceted. Some school personnel view parents as ignorant and intrusive; others view parents as informative, helpful and sometimes aloof. Parents' perceptions of their own involvement are equally diverse. Many parents envision themselves as capable, connected partners; others see themselves tangential, bit players in the education of their children. Overcoming the roles, or scripts (Bartley, 1986), stakeholders assign to each other are the some of the greatest challenges of parent involvement (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Walker et al., 2005).

Lawson (2003) also presented conclusions about parent involvement barriers observed in his research: communication, school-centric versus community centric perspectives, parental trust of schools, children's attitude toward parent involvement, silence, role responsibilities, and teacher apathy. Lawson's conclusions were based on the single case he studied in urban Sacramento; but there are supportive data in the parent involvement literature.

Communication or the lack thereof is the first barrier of parent involvement described in Lawson's study. Parents who participated in the investigation reported that their perceptions were unaccepted by schools. Communication, the parents explained, is often unidirectional, with school treating parents like passive recipients of information rather than participants in a joint quest to develop young minds.

Even when mutual understandings are accurately communicated, stakeholders still run into roadblocks anchored in opposing perspectives. Lawson surmised that, when it comes to parent partnerships, school staffs are sometimes overly-focused on issues that matter only inside

the school building. Topics such as student achievement (i.e., standardized test scores), discipline, fundraising, and attendance are among the most targeted areas. Parents tend to understand the importance of education to the success of their children, but they are also concerned with subjects that are outside of the school's purview. Lawson found that parents often become more school-centric as they form more intense partnerships with school staff, but school staffs are less likely to become more community-focused.

According to Lawson, trust appears to be a large factor in parent involvement decisions—from the perspectives of school personnel and parents alike; and other investigations support Lawson's assertion. Research by Bryk and Schneider (2003) and others revealed connections between trust among school stakeholders and variables such as student achievement, teacher efficacy, and school climate (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Adams & Forsyth, 2007; Forsyth, Barnes, & Adams, 2006). Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy (2001) found that teacher trust in students and parents was a greater predictor of student achievement than socioeconomic status of the student population.

"Children's attributions of parent involvement" are other phenomena that impede parent involvement. Some parents interact with school staff only when teachers or administrators call with bad news such as disciplinary infractions or poor academic performance (Flaughner, 2006). Therefore, some students might develop a negative association with parent involvement.

The reluctance to address historical differences in class, race, and culture—or "silence" as Lawson terms it—is another phenomena that conflicts with parent involvement. Scholars have long studied the impacts of within and across group differences on stakeholder relationships. Lawson contends that school staffs often avoid exploring deep-rooted stereotypes, resource

differential, and unequal power relationships that likely heavily influence the goals and outcomes of school and parent partnerships.

Halsey (2005) documented an example of how power relationships and stereotypes affect parent-school relationships. Several teachers in Halsey's interviews claimed that parents did not value education because parents were not consistently participating in institutionally-sanctioned forms of involvement. On the other hand, parents claimed that teachers did not value parent involvement because schools recognized only particular forms of involvement.

Flaughter's (2006) survey of parents suggests that teachers appear to be the gateway to parent involvement. Most parents made efforts to at least meet, if not maintain regular contact with, their children's teacher(s). Therefore, Flaughter recognized, some school districts are preparing teachers to be the primary dispensers of parent involvement information. Lawson's research uncovered teacher reports of over-extension. Teachers described feelings of enablement because they offered carrots such as attendance rewards, food, or extended hours for trainings and conferences. If teachers resist ingratiating themselves to parents, be it due to skepticism, insulation, or any other reason, involvement is less likely to occur.

Perhaps the lack of effective school invitations for parent involvement is also a barrier. Perhaps the use of effective school insulation strategies is a barrier to parent involvement. Invitations and insulation appear to be polar opposite strategies that can be used to overcome (in the case of invitations) or support (in the case of insulation) the obstacles described by Boethel (2003), Lawson (2003), and other writers.

Types of School Invitations for Parent Involvement

Policy practitioners on the ground level have a substantial effect on the policy's implementation and therefore its ultimate success or failure (Flaughner, 2006; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). School-level employees significantly impact the effect and local perception of a policy, regardless of the policy or standards at the district, state or national levels. Therefore, staff perception of parent involvement is a critical component of family involvement in school.

A review of the literature shows that in some cases, personnel embrace and solicit parent participation; in other cases they disdain and avoid family assistance (DiPoala & Tschannen-Moran, 2005; Epstein, 1985; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Halsey, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). With respect to school behaviors toward parent involvement, the literature presents three basic models: insulation, tolerance, and solicitation. The following section describes each model, and presents associated types of invitations.

Schools sometimes actively resist parent involvement in an effort to protect themselves from outside interests. DiPoala and Tschannen-Moran (2005) labeled this behavior "buffering." Despite finding buffering's negative relationship to student achievement, the authors' research suggests that insulation might be the most prevalent form of school behavior that responds to the potential for community involvement. Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2002) described a "parent-as-intruder" perspective among schools that practiced insulation.

Tolerance is the second model of school behaviors toward parent involvement. In this model, school staff recognize that parent involvement—in at least one form—is inevitable and staff do not combat directly parent presence in the school building. For instance, during interviews with Quioco and Daoud (2006), teachers described parents as unskilled, illiterate and disinterested in helping their children with school. Parent involvement in this instance was not

actively rebuffed by staff members, but it was clear that assistance of parents was not highly valued.

Ramirez (2002) explored the notion of insulation and tolerance as manifestations in cartoons in education journals. The author did not contend that journals, let alone the cartoons therein, drive the perceptions of educators across the country. To the contrary, Ramirez stated that journals reflect the general sentiments of their core audiences. Therefore these periodicals can be used as broad barometers of the perceptions of educators likely to read such journals.

Through the cartoon lens, Ramirez found example after example of indifferent, oppositional and/or antagonistic stereotypes of K-12 families. Parents in many cartoons appeared lazy, uninterested and/or displeased with schools. Communications between parents and schools generally appeared adversarial. For instance, one cartoon depicted a youngster walking through the front door of his home triumphantly waving a piece of paper. As his mother looked on, the boy shouted how proud his mom should be because the principal wanted to see her on the first day of school. The boy's mother appeared nonplussed. The drawing did not explicitly indicate the purpose of the principal-parent meeting, but one gets the impression that it was for a bad reason. Why else would the boy's pride be considered a joke?

When schools perceive the importance of parent involvement, the staff often solicit parent support. Solicitation can take many forms, but the result is the same: school personnel—either in person, in writing, or by proxy—ask parents to become more involved. A primary assumption of the study is that all schools invite at least some parents to be involved in some way. A secondary assumption is that less is known about the way invitations affect parent forms of involvement.

Abdul-Adil and Farmer (2006) reviewed some of the literature on African American parent involvement, including several program evaluations, and found three types of strategies regularly used by parent involvement proponents: empowerment, building on indigenous resources, and outreach.

Empowerment involvement strategies “offer parents training or skills that allow them to be more involved in their children’s education” (p. 5). Such strategies include parent training programs and the provision of mental health services.

Indigenous resources: “refer to programs that use existing parent-oriented supports within the family and community settings” (p. 5). Such projects often go beyond a focus on skills and behaviors and attempt to create synergy with locations, services, and outside agencies. Abdul-Adil and Farmer contend that IR programs affirm

the value of the child and family. Moreover, these indigenous skills and strengths are available to support and sustain interventions beyond limitations of external programs because they do not struggle with such barriers as time limits of reform initiatives, funding limits of research grants, or personnel limits of staff turnover.
(p. 8)

Outreach involvement approaches attempt to make “services more accessible by programs designed to meet parents ‘where they are’ in familiar and comfortable settings, in their communities” (p. 5). Outreach programs include school staff visits to students’ homes or community centers. Abdul-Adil and Farmer found that programs that combined home and school-based interventions were more successful than those focused exclusively on school involvement. Also, parents rated outreach programs more highly than strategies focused on empowerment and indigenous resources.

Abdul-Adil and Farmer suggest more closely examining the “demographic characteristics of participating parent populations” (p. 8),” exploring cultural and contextually relevant interventions” (p.9), exploring the participation of minority populations in “suburban settings.”

Nardine (1990) observed a computer education program for at-risk youth in which the staff considered parent involvement a core component. When initial participation proved lackluster, the staff reached out to parents in an effort to create channels for dialogue and understand parent perspectives. The program changed its hours, its core strategies, and other operating procedures based on conversations with parents.

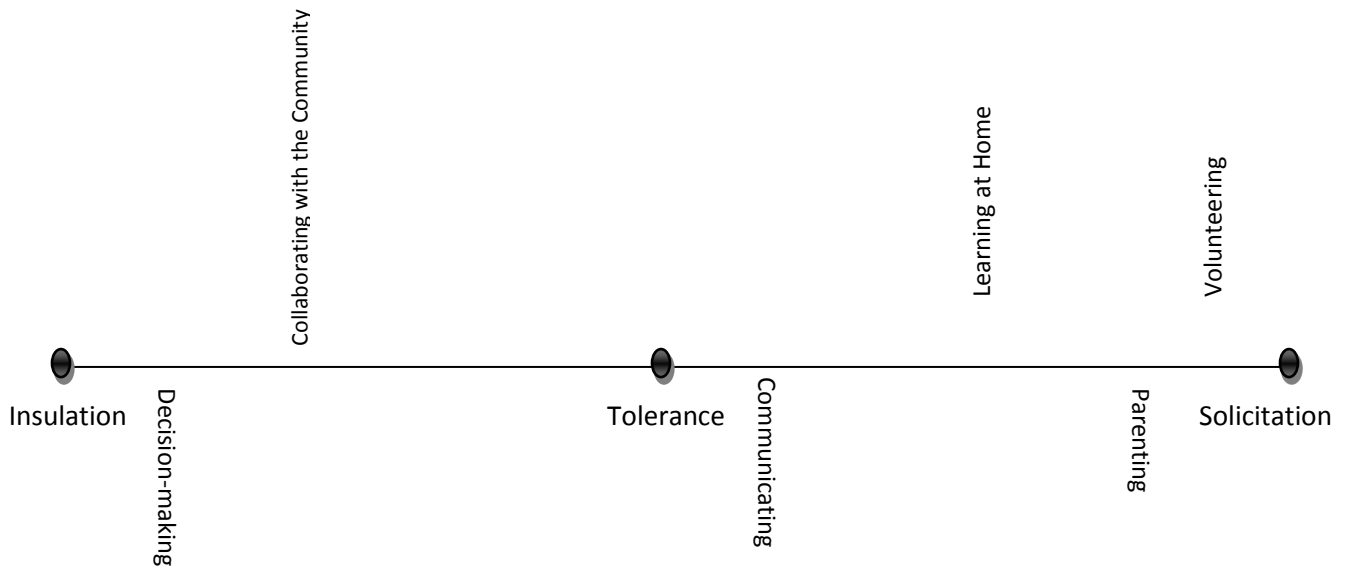
Nardine (1990) opined that because families were so valued, invited and accepted for what they offered, the computer education program subsequently realized dramatic increases in attendance and participation. Nardine attributed the upswing, in part, to the staff members’ perceptions of family involvement as essential; and willingness to combine the desires of parents with their own.

Sheldon and Epstein’s (2002) research also supports the theory that the perception of parents as critical partners can be an intrinsic involvement mechanism. In their study of surveys from 47 elementary, middle, and high schools, the researchers found that schools that reportedly valued parent involvement also reported the most parent involvement. The authors’ data also implied that schools with higher values of parent involvement incurred less student discipline issues such as officer referrals, detentions, and suspensions.

These parent involvement models can be seen to operate as a continuum (Figure 3) rather than three distinct stances on parent involvement. Moreover, staff attitudes may tend toward one model for a particular type of involvement and another model for a different type. For instance,

schools sometimes covet parent help with homework and attendance at parent conferences, while at the same time eschewing parent participation in critical school decisions.

Figure 3. A Sample Parent Involvement Perception Continuum



The parent involvement literature documents differences in the method and content of school contacts with parents. These contacts are often solicitations for parent involvement, but they can vary in terms of method of contact and content.

Empirical evidence suggests that school staffs tend to invite parent involvement through what Halsey (2005) describes as "institutional communication" such as newsletters, open houses, and parent conferences (Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005). Institutional contacts, however, rarely led to personal contacts between parents and teachers. Halsey recommends that schools promote and cultivate personal connections between parents and teachers, particularly because many parents reported preferences for informal, less scripted forms of parent staff conversations.

Teachers, on the other hand, expressed comfort with the greater control of institutional contacts, letters, or phone calls initiated by school themselves.

General and specific invitations. Invitations—whether they are written or verbal— can vary in terms of content. The study recognized two types of content: general and specific. Examination along these two lines of content could have yielded evidence that supported conclusions that connect parents' involvement decisions and the types of school invitations. For instance, specific verbal invitations could have been more likely to lead to parent involvement in school decision-making activities.

General invitations are generic expressions of welcome. For example, teachers sometimes tell parents that parents are always welcome in the classroom or that the school could always use more volunteers. With such invitations, there are no definite time commitments implied. As one parent in Halsey's (2005) investigation analogized: to many parents, general invitations—such as open door policies—can seem like the equivalent of saying “let's do lunch some time.” Without attaching a specific place, date, time, or activity, general invitations can appear as obligatory statements of tolerance. School staff members could make such statements to put parents at ease, not because parents are really welcome.

Specific invitations for involvement are involvement requests that school staffs link with times, locations, dates, and/or activities. Specific solicitations could include invitations to PTA functions, school leadership team meetings, parent-teacher conferences, or field trips. Requests of a specific nature could also deal with homework assistance, reading at home, or help with managing student behavior.

Urban Education and the Deficit Model

America's urban communities are more racially and culturally diverse than ever (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Roulier, 2000). The income gap is widening and family dynamics have changed. More working parents spend less time with their children. Some school districts have increased the responsibilities of schools in order to compensate for a perceived decrease in direct parental instruction and care. Part of the increased responsibility can be seen in the form of character education, universal breakfasts, and before-and-after-school childcare programs.

The teaching population, on the other hand, has not kept pace with the changing student demographics. The profession is still comprised mostly of middle-class White women, although student demographics show increases in minority, poor, and ESOL percentages (Guarino et al., 2006). Research suggests race and class influence teacher-student interactions at the classroom level. Many teachers tend to have lower expectations of minority students, and consequently alter their instructional programs as demonstrated by calling on minority students less often and asking them less challenging questions, among other behaviors (Delpit, 1995; Grayson & Martin, 2001; Mediratta & Fruchter, 2003; O'Connor, 2001). Moreover, the behaviors that accompany teacher expectations may be particularly crucial for minority students (Singham, 2003).

As the diversity of communities increased, the disparity between the behavior and academic performance of poor and minority students and White, middle-class students became more apparent. Many researchers and educators attributed the achievement gap to the dysfunction of minority and poor families (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005; Kirk & Goon, 1975; O'Connor, 2001). The deficit view of families undergirds many parent involvement programs across the country (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Contrary to the opinion of some stakeholders, there is little, if any, statistical difference between African-American and White parental involvement (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Seyfried & Chung, 2002; Warren & Fitzgerald, 1997). The slight difference sometimes noted between minority and White parent involvement often can be attributed to socioeconomic status (Fan, 2001; Hill & Craft, 2003). However, few studies look specifically at the involvement decisions of minority parents.

Shutz (2006) contends that the problems of many urban areas and the schools therein do not originate with race, but with concomitant poverty. He goes further to state that behaviors associated with what society commonly refers to as a “culture of poverty” are simply strategies that citizens use to cope with harsh situations in their cities. Shutz and others (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Hirota & Jacobs, 2003; Kay, 2002; Mediratta, Fruchter & Lewis, 2002) opine that in order to get parents, students, and other community stakeholders more involved in schools, school personnel must engage in pedagogy that is rooted in the communities from which these stakeholders come. Community organizing groups are now pushing for school priorities that are more in line with the desires of a diverse constituency such as equitable funding among schools, safe environments both within and immediately surrounding schools, and community access to school facilities (Mediratta et al., 2002; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Social capital, which refers to productive networks with other school stakeholders, also impacts parent involvement in schools (Desimone, 1999; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; O’Connor, 2001; Yan & Lin, 2005). For example, parent information groups assist their members with monitoring students’ academic and social activities. In this way, families are able to maintain closer relationships with the schools their children attend. Because school cultures tend to closely resemble middle-class behaviors and values, minority students are at a disadvantage (Boethel,

2003; Crozier, 2004; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Desimone, 1999; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Mediratta & Fruchter, 2003; Shutz, 2006; Wells & Serna, 1996).

The differences in parents' social capital exemplify the power differentials that influence stakeholder interactions. School family involvement policies do not typically account for the unequal social capital and power that exist within and between various constituencies (Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Leistyna, 2002; O'Connor, 2001). Even in ostensibly diverse involvement models, power relationships still play out. For example, parents defer to teachers, teachers defer to administration, and administrators defer to district office personnel (Malen, 1999; Malen & Ogawa, 1988). Moreover, if school level policies and practices change to reflect the importance of socio-cultural inequities, the policies would likely have little effect on external factors such as family resources.

Wells and Serna (1996) documented another instance of how parent involvement might work to maintain the advantage of a subgroup of students and perpetuate the status quo in schools. The authors studied the implementation of student academic tracking alternatives and the social forces that influence them. More specifically, the researchers studied how elite parents used social and cultural capital to avoid what they label "detracking reform." Schools placed students of elite families in gifted classes and advanced placement courses that avoided integrated classrooms. The authors concluded that as long as schools and school systems cater primarily to the desires of elites, possibly for fear of losing elite students to other schools, then schools, and likely communities, will continue to promote separation and inequality.

Teacher expectations, disproportionate poverty rates, parental educational attainment discrepancies, and classroom grouping are just some of the correlates that are impacted by America's history of classism and racism (Cline & Necochea, 2001). Some scholars, such as

Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) and Ogbu (1981), assert that many young minorities developed a culture of opposition (i.e., a fear of acting White) as a coping mechanism for second-class citizenship. It is logical to believe that some parents of present-day students, many of whom were recently students themselves, carry similar sentiments toward schools that influence parent involvement choices.

The impact of parent involvement on student achievement sometimes varies when disaggregated by race (Desimone, 1999; Jeynes, 2003; McNeal, 1999). For example, Desimone's (1999) research suggests that educational discussions between White parents and White children were related to increases in math test scores; but Asian, Latino, and African American parent-child discussions did not predict test scores. McNeal found that a parent's PTO involvement was related to increases in science test scores for African American and White students; but PTO involvement had no relationship to test scores for Latinos and Asians.

The influence of racial and ethnic differences on parent involvement might be overstated, however, because socioeconomic status has been closely linked to race. When controlling for socioeconomic level, some researchers have found little, or no, difference among ethnic groups, although beliefs about involvement sometimes lead to different behaviors among groups (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Fan, 2001; Hill & Craft, 2003).

The comparisons of minority families and poor families to White, middle-class families present a paradox. There are racial and economic differences in terms of parent involvement practices and likely effects that exist concurrently with racial and economic differences in achievement. Achievement and involvement disparities should be examined. On the other hand, if educators and researchers position the behaviors and cultures of middle-class White students as the norm, then other student groups will likely appear "less than normal," because their

behaviors will often deviate from “Whiteness” (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Ferguson, 1998; Hill & Craft, 2003; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kirk & Goon, 1975). Without some resolution of this paradox, White, middle-class students and their families will probably continue to operate from an advantaged position, leaving minorities in a second-class status.

Limitations of Prior Research

Many studies establish connections between parent involvement and student outcomes. However, less is known about the decision rules parents use to determine whether to involve themselves at all.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler established a framework that delineates the basis for parents’ involvement decisions. The handful of studies that utilize the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model suggest that teacher and child invitations are key components of parent involvement (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). However, less is known about what types of invitations are most effective in terms of getting parents involved, and how particular types of invitations connect to particular types of parent involvement. Even less is known about the decisions of particular demographic segments, such as low-income parents of urban elementary school children, because research on parent involvement programs does not focus often on geographic subgroup data (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, Jr., 2006). Abdul-Adil and Farmer, Jr. (2006) suggest that

Parental involvement efforts with inner-city African Americans are currently hampered by problems of research methodology and program foci. Still there is emerging evidence that inner-city African American parents may respond

positively to parental involvement programs that emphasize themes of empowerment, outreach, and indigenous resources. (p. 8)

In their survey of elementary school teachers and parents, Joshi, Eberly, and Konzal (2005) noticed that “written communication” and parent conferences were the most frequent forms of invitations for parent involvement. The study drew no conclusions about the comparative influence of written communication versus any other kind of communication.

In addition to the need for further exploration of the effects of invitations on subgroups, the methods of studies that use the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model are not relatively diverse. The scholars that orient their investigations using the model typically apply it quantitatively. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) admit that the psychological and quantitative slant of the model and subsequent research offer only a limited view of the parental involvement dynamic. The authors suggest that investigators also explore the model in ways that examine contextual implications and social influences that might not present themselves as clearly through survey methodology. Therefore, a qualitative approach to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model could significantly expand the understanding of both the model specifically and parental involvement decisions in general.

In several of their articles, Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues express the need for qualitative complements to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model:

Another limitation emerges from a monomethod bias, as all data were collected through survey measures. This limitation may pose some challenge to construct validity because the range of constructs measured and participants’ responses were limited by the survey design. Finally, this study used only self-report data, which may have created some favorable self-report bias....future studies should

complement survey measures with other methods, including interviews with parents. The use of interviews would help provide a richer and deeper understanding of the constructs involved and would allow further insights into how parents think about these constructs in making their decisions. (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007, p. 282)

Further, Hoover-Dempsey's team advocates for further examination of the effects of invitations on parent involvement choices:

Future studies might use multiple methods (e.g., parent interviews in addition to parent survey responses) and acquire information from multiple sources (e.g., teacher, child, and parent reports for some variables)...future research and practice should particularly attend to the importance of invitations for parents' involvement decisions. (Green et al., 2007, pp. 541-542)

This section reviewed the empirical literature that describes parent involvement, its connections to student outcomes and urban education. The review suggests that parents involve themselves in a variety of ways that influence student development. However, less is known about the variables that impact parents' choices for involvement, particularly as those variables pertain to school invitations.

In general, empirical claims about the connections between parent involvement and positive student outcomes reside in a contested terrain, but there is sufficient evidence to justify a closer look at factors that influence involvement and the assumptions behind parent involvement policies. The methods described in the next section provide examples of how I intend to examine the how staff in a Title I school in an urban school district made sense of parent involvement policies, established parent involvement priorities, and generally interacted with the parents of

the children in their school. These methods are meant to support the type of disciplined inquiry and detailed descriptions necessary to gain contextual understandings about parent involvement practices and policies.

Chapter 3: Methods

This investigation explored the parent involvement practices of a school that served a primarily low-income student population. The study specifically investigated stakeholder perceptions about parent involvement activities in the school. By examining these stakeholder perceptions in greater detail, I attempted to better understand how the staff of low-income and schools prioritize, implement, and evaluate parent involvement policies and programs. Such an understanding has the potential to refine current theories of parent involvement as well as inform local policies.

The research questions were meant to expand our understanding of how the staff at such schools develops parent involvement priorities, devises strategies to encourage the involvement of low-income parents, and how low-income parents interpret and respond to these efforts:

- 1) What types of parent involvement does the staff consider to be most important and why does it consider some forms of parent involvement more important than others?
Does the staff have a collective vision of parent involvement?
- 2) How does the staff of a low-income school form parent involvement priorities, policies, and programs? To what extent do policies such as Title I, Race to the Top, and No Child Left Behind influence the formation of parent involvement priorities, policies, and programs?
- 3) How does the staff of a low-income school go about promoting different forms of parent involvement? What types of parent involvement invitations are made by school staff to parents?

- 4) Which types of parent involvement programs and practices does the staff deem effective? What factors does the staff consider when evaluating the effects of programs and practices?

This study used a qualitative design – more specifically, an exploratory case study design. Such a design facilitated an in-depth analysis of stakeholder beliefs, and it had the potential to uncover aspects of a phenomenon that are not easily seen with quantitative methods (Honig et al., 2001; Creswell, 1998). Parent-school relationships are complex associations that are nested within home, school, and community contexts (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis & George, 2004; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2001), and qualitative methods are well-suited to collect, accommodate, illuminate, and analyze unanticipated evidence within the causal web of variables that influence parent involvement. The use of case study methodology also allowed for the consideration of multiple data sources in an effort to provide an accurate picture of the parent-school relationships as they pertain to parents' involvement in their children's education.

This chapter provides an explanation of how I attempted to answer the study's research questions. First, I describe the site for the study, followed by a description of participants. Then I discuss data collection, types of data, and analysis, including how I tried to enhance the credibility of findings. I conclude with a brief discussion of the limitations of this study and potential contributions that this study can make to the literature.

Research Design

This study used an exploratory case study approach to examine the potential links between school staff's parent involvement priorities, practices and results. According to Yin

(2003) and others (Cresswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995), case studies can be effective means to investigate contemporary phenomena over which investigators have little or no control. In addition, Yin says that case studies are well-suited to examine how or why phenomena occur. The study fits these criteria because I had little control over key variables that might have influenced stakeholder participation, but I wanted to examine how and why staff members employed particular kinds of parent involvement practices. For instance, I wanted to gain a better understanding of how schools site governance teams prioritized desired forms of parent involvement and whether rank-and-file staff shared the same beliefs about the importance of different forms.

I refer to the study as exploratory because prior research has not posited a theory that describes how schools determined priorities regarding different forms of parent involvement and how they solicited parent involvement. (See Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; and Yin, 2003 for a fuller discussion of what constitutes an exploratory case study.) Although the literature review identified several studies that describe possible connections between staff's practices and parents' decisions about involvement, these studies do not represent an in-depth analysis of the phenomena. A goal of this study was to explore more fully the relationship between school priorities, practices, and results, so as to enhance existing theories about parent involvement.

Site and Population of Interest

This investigation used a theoretical sample (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Theoretical samples are similar to what others have called criterion samples (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990), in which participant groups demographically represent the target population and/or other pre-established standards for

identifying a phenomenon of interest. The researcher bases participant and site selections on criteria believed to demonstrate the capacity to generate necessary data to answer research questions. Although theoretical samples lack the broad generalizability sought in a random sample, research that employs this sampling technique allows for analytic generalizations (Yin, 2003) to the phenomenon in question – in this case, factors that influence how staff of low-income schools develop, implement, and evaluate parent involvement policies.

Moreover, theoretical samples are appropriate for qualitative research designs because such samples provide sufficient evidence on which to base conclusions, as well as allow for changes in sample design and data collection methods should the need arise to gather additional information from new or current participants. According to Mertens (2005), theoretical samples can “provide sufficient details so the reader can see the progression in [the researcher’s] conceptual development and induction of relationships” (p. 242). As a study progresses, changes in the sample designed to enhance the representation of a phenomenon – through the collection of additional data and/ or the inclusion of additional participants – reveal how the researcher conceptualizes and reconceptualizes a phenomenon and factors important to understanding it.

The important criteria for this exploratory case study were criteria that would enhance the likelihood that I would be able to investigate different stakeholder perspectives of parent involvement activities at a school that served primarily low-income students. To that end, I selected a former Title I elementary school that had a reputedly active parent involvement program. The school did not have an “extraordinary” parent involvement program, but a sufficient program to ensure my ability to conduct the study. The program ostensibly promoted a range of parent involvement activities, such as those described in Epstein’s (1995) taxonomy, and they solicited parent involvement in multiple ways (e.g., newsletters, letters home to

parents, telephone calls). I selected stakeholders at the school based on their roles (e.g., parents, PTA president, school leadership council chair, teachers, administrators), and willingness to participate in the interview process. The final sample of respondents yielded sufficient data by which to answer all four research questions.

Site selection. The search for a site location began within Suburban County Public Schools (SCPS).² Several schools within SCPS could have yielded theoretical samples (i.e., schools that serve low-income populations and attempt to involve parents). In addition, the district was recently recognized by the National Parent Teacher Association and the Harvard Family Research Project for being a district that was dedicated to improving parent involvement (Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez, & Weiss, 2009). I originally decided to focus on a Title I elementary school within the SCPS for three primary reasons: (1) schools that receive Title I funds serve a majority of low-income families; (2) Title I schools must provide at least yearly documentation of how they work toward parent involvement; and (3) elementary schools typically have more forms of parent involvement than middle and secondary schools. These factors, along with the district's efforts to promote parent involvement, increased the probability that I would be able to identify a school that meets my sampling criteria.

Within the district, the study used a site that did not have an extraordinary parent involvement program but a reputedly active program nonetheless. Preliminary conversations with a then-member of SCPS's Title I office revealed that, while schools did complete parent involvement plans, and state and district offices monitor the plans, there were no tools that gauged the effectiveness of parent involvement programs in SCPS Title I schools. The choice of school was based upon discussions with the member of the SCPS Title I office. I reasoned that

² I use the pseudonym Suburban County Public Schools for the purposes of confidentiality.

the Title I Office staff should have been able to point out several schools with active parent involvement programs that I might approach for the study.

Based on a May 2010 interview with the family involvement coordinator from the SCPS Title I Office and a review of school demographics, I selected Wilson Elementary School (WES), a school located in a suburb of a major city on the East Coast, as the site for this study. WES served 538 students, mostly African-American students, from Pre-Kindergarten through sixth grade, at the time of the study. Although WES was a Title I school when it was selected, I found out that SCPS revised its Title I guidelines and WES lost its Title I status just as I commenced collecting data. According to the principal at WES, SCPS increased the FARMS rate necessary to qualify for Title I status due to an increase in the district's overall FARMS population. Although WES was not a Title I school at the time of the study, WES had a higher FARMS enrollment (71%) than the district average (62%).

Overall, WES demographic and achievement data resembled elementary schools in the district that served larger populations of students from low-income neighborhoods. For example, WES had a higher percentage of FARMS and African-American students than the district, though a slightly lower percentages of English language learners and students with disabilities. (See Table 1 for a comparison of demographic and academic data for SCPS and Wilson Elementary School.) Levels of proficiency in the state-mandated assessments are mostly lower than the levels of proficiency at the district, with the largest difference being in the state fifth grade assessment of science. Mobility rates are also higher at Wilson than in the district, with staff reporting nearly half of students changing schools during the school year. Also, WES entered the NCLB school improvement process during the 2011 school year because the school did not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) on the 2010 state standardized test.

Wilson Elementary School is an average-sized school that sits between commercial and residential areas in a low-income neighborhood about 5 miles outside of a major city. The building is a two-story, red-brick construction that is about 6 years old. The two-story front of the building houses the main office, intermediate grade levels, and a multi-purpose room that serves as an auditorium, media center, computer laboratory, gymnasium, and cafeteria. The rear section of the facility consists of one floor; it contains the primary grade levels (grades K-2).

To the right of the school is a residential neighborhood replete with narrow streets and lower-income, cape-cod and bungalow style homes. One block to the left of the school is a commercial district comprised of one-story businesses such as nail salons, take-out restaurants, convenience stores, and a post office.

As one might expect based on its recent construction, the school appears relatively modern; all rooms have electronic whiteboards and a few late-model student computers. Teachers have district-issued laptops for home and school use. The hallways and bathrooms are typically free of debris and excessive noise.

Table 1. SCPS and Wilson Elementary School General Demographic Information for the 2011 School Year

<i>Category</i>	<i>SCPS*</i>	<i>Wilson ES*</i>
<i>African American students</i>	69%	90%
<i>Hispanic students</i>	21%	7%
<i>White/Caucasian students</i>	4%	<i>Less than 1%</i>
<i>Asian students</i>	3%	<i>Less than 1%</i>
<i>Native American students</i>	<i>Less than 1%</i>	<i>Less than 1%</i>
<i>Two or more races</i>	2%	<i>Less than 1%</i>
<i>Students receiving free or reduced meals (Elementary)</i>	64%	75%
<i>Limited English Proficient Students (Elementary)</i>	18%	6%
<i>Special Education students(Elementary)</i>	10%	7%
<i>Students scoring proficient or advanced on 2010 state assessment – Elementary Reading</i>	<i>All: 81%</i> <i>3rd: 79%</i> <i>4th: 83%</i> <i>5th: 84%</i> <i>6th: 78%</i>	<i>All: 71%</i> <i>3rd: 65%</i> <i>4th: 71%</i> <i>5th: 58%</i> <i>6th: 81%</i>
<i>Students scoring proficient or advanced on 2010 state assessment – Elementary Math</i>	<i>All: 78%</i> <i>3rd: 78%</i> <i>4th: 84%</i> <i>5th: 73%</i> <i>6th: 73%</i>	<i>All: 71%</i> <i>3rd: 57%</i> <i>4th: 80%</i> <i>5th: 58%</i> <i>6th: 75%</i>
<i>Students scoring proficient and advanced on 2010 5th Grade state assessment – Science</i>	55%	29%
<i>Student Mobility (Elementary)</i>	26%	37%

* Categories are rounded to the nearest percent.

Access. A credible research design is essential to any disciplined inquiry; but issues of access and resources sometimes restrict the options of researchers. Investigators often depend on the assistance of gatekeepers or personal relationships with informants to gain access to data (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Access to the participant pool was based on the professional relationships and interpersonal skills of the researcher. At the time of the site selection, I had taught in six elementary schools within three nearby school districts during the last fourteen years. In addition, I had been contracted as a speaker for SCPS's Title I office and conducted consulting projects for two neighboring school districts. During those years and through these professional interactions, I made contacts with several employees of SCPS, including the previously-mentioned former parent involvement coordinator in the Title I department who helped me gain access to some Title I schools within the district. The coordinator facilitated my contact with the principal of Wilson Elementary. The principal agreed to allow the study contingent upon approval from the school district.

Once district leadership granted permission for the study, I had a follow-up conversation in person with the principal, and I attended Wilson's Back to School Night. At the conclusion of Back to School Night, I approached several parents and staff to present myself and the study (in general terms so as not to affect the validity of the investigation). I believed that rapport-building with the target population might be hastened because I am an African-American teacher and parent who resided in Suburban County, and I grew up in a low-income household.

While my race, residency, and background may have facilitated some commitments to participate, the recruitment of participants proved more difficult than I expected. One parent, the PTA president, and three staff members verbally agreed to participate in the interview process. During the next two months, I visited WES six times—three mornings before school and three afternoons following dismissal—and went classroom-to-classroom to solicit participants for staff interviews. I presented myself and the study in general terms, and announced that I would meet staff at any time and place they felt comfortable. While over a dozen staff members verbally

agreed to take part in the study, only seven staff members actually provided me with a time and place in which they could be interviewed.

Participants. This study sought to explore the development, implementation, and evaluation of parent involvement at a low-income school. Although the study is exploratory, the study may help to refine existing theories of parent involvement, particularly with regards to how invited parents move to being involved parents. I secured two WES parents and seven WES staff members to participate in the study. Three primary teachers and two parents were interviewed in respective focus groups. The other staff members were interviewed privately. These were the participants in the study:

Mr. Johnson (Principal)

Mr. Johnson was Wilson's principal. He was African American, and he was the leader of Wilson since its opening in 2005. By most accounts, Mr. Johnson was energetic and friendly toward staff and parents. At the conclusion of the data collection school year, Mr. Johnson was reassigned to an assistant principal position at a middle school in another area of the school district. He was interviewed privately.

Ms. Duncan (Primary Teacher)

Ms. Duncan was an African-American first-grade teacher. She had taught for six years, all of which were at Wilson Elementary School. She had only taught first grade. She was serving her first year as chairperson of the school leadership team at the time of the study. She was interviewed in a focus group with Ms. Jackson and Ms. Jarrett.

Ms. Jackson (Primary Teacher)

Ms. Jackson was a white Kindergarten teacher. She had been teaching for 40 years, seven years at WES and 33 years at her previous school. She was interviewed in a focus group with Ms. Duncan and Ms. Jarrett.

Ms. Jarrett (Primary Teacher)

Ms. Jarrett was an African-American first-grade teacher. It was her first year at WES at the time of the study. Prior to coming to WES, Ms. Jarrett had taught in four different schools during the previous eight years. She was interviewed in a focus group with Ms. Jackson and Ms. Duncan.

Ms. Taylor (Intermediate Teacher)

Ms. Taylor was a white fifth-grade teacher. She had taught for 11 years, ten of which had been at Wilson. Ms. Taylor was interviewed privately.

Mr. Stewart (Intermediate Teacher)

Mr. Stewart was an African-American fourth-grade teacher. At the time of the study, it was his fifth year working at WES. Mr. Stewart had also worked at four different schools during the previous 19 years. Mr. Stewart was the leader of the fourth grade team as well as a member of the school leadership team. He was the staff member that other staff members most indicated would be helpful to interview because of his school leadership team experience and willingness to share his opinions. Mr. Stewart was interviewed privately.

Ms. Toliver (Resource Teacher)

Ms. Toliver was an African-American special education resource teacher. She had been teaching for 33 years at the time of the study, five of which were spent at WES. She had taught at 4 different schools before coming to WES. Ms. Toliver was interviewed privately.

Ms. King (Parent)

Ms. King was an African-American parent of one student at Wilson Elementary School. She was also the president of the WES Parent Teacher Organization at the time of the study. Ms. King had been the president for the previous three years. She also had a middle-school-aged child who used to attend WES. Ms. King was employed as a senior requirements analyst. By the accounts of all participants, Ms. King was driven, organized, and committed to Wilson.

Ms. Henson (Parent)

Ms. Henson was an African-American parent of two school-age children, one of which was a Wilson sixth grader. Ms. Henson also began working at WES during that school year. She worked full-time to help implement WES' reading and math interventions. Ms. Henson possessed an associate's degree, and said that Wilson's staff was instrumental in her attempts to improve her education and the financial circumstances of her family.

Strategies for Data Collection

In case study research, data collection is an ongoing process that often begins before the formal study begins (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). All relevant data cannot be collected. Researchers use the study's questions to decide what data will be included and what data will be excluded from a study's consideration. As Stake (1995) puts it, "full coverage is impossible, equal attention to all data is not a civil right. The case and the key issues need to be kept in focus" (p. 84).

Qualitative researchers use multiple sources of evidence, maintain an ongoing database, and present a chain of evidence linking data with conclusions. Sources of evidence for qualitative studies often include interviews, observations, and reviews of documents and other relevant artifacts. Some scholars contend that no source of evidence is uniformly preferred over others (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). All sources are multifaceted and possess relative strengths and limitations depending on the research design and questions (Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mertens, 2005). This dissertation weighed interview data more heavily than other sources because the study explores participant perceptions of schools' priorities, policies, and practices regarding parent involvement.

All interviews were semi-structured to encourage participants to speak freely and to allow me to discover and compare themes across respondents. Appendix A displays the interview protocol, although I diverted from the protocol at times in an effort to probe for fuller responses from interviewees, a common practice in qualitative research (Cooper & Christie, 2005). Each interview took place in locations and times chosen by the respective participants; and all respondents chose to be interviewed somewhere in Wilson's building. Interviews took place during November, January, and February of the 2011-2012 school year. The average interview

was approximately 36 minutes, with a range from a 15 minute interview with Ms. Taylor, to a 52 minute focus group session with the primary teachers.

Although parent and staff interviews were the primary data sources in the investigation, I also conducted a site visit to observe Back to School Night. The observation allowed for comparisons of involvement practices to later reports of involvement practices by staff. I was able to use Back to School Night as triangulated data to confirm or question staff claims about parent involvement invitations, staff participation, and parents' subsequent involvement decisions.

In addition to interviews and the observation, I reviewed relevant documents to complete the database. Table 2 lists some of the documents I examined. Although documents were created by various sources, I found every document at either a WES or SCPS location. Some items were hardcopies found in the WES main office or lobby; other documents were located online on SCPS websites. Reviews of documents shed additional light on school purposes, policies, procedures, and practices pertaining to parental involvement.

Table 2. List of documents reviewed

Title	Format	Source Type	Topics
SCPS 2010 Master Plan	521-page text	School district	District vision, data, programs, mandates
SCPS 2012 Master Plan	566-page text	School district	District vision, data, programs, mandates
SCPS Annual Report	76-page text	School district	District vision, data, programs
SCPS Board of Education parent involvement policy	2-page document	School district	Parent involvement vision, mandates
State Department of Education <i>NCLB</i> and <i>Race to the Top</i> documents	1-page to 7-page documents	State department of education	Various, including: Parent involvement policies, program templates, budget templates
WES climate survey	31-page document	School district	Staff and parent climate data
SCPS parents' rights memo	2-page document	School district	Parents' rights and responsibilities
SCPS parent engagement memo	Flyer	School district	Parents' rights and responsibilities
Principal's letter	Web page	WES principal	School vision
WES School Improvement Plan (2010-2012)	5-page document	WES staff	WES' data and goals
School newsletters	1-page document	WES staff	Informational updates and school mission
SCPS Title I documents	1-page to 3-page documents	SCPS Title I Office	Various, including: Program pre-approval template, highly qualified staff letters for parents, and report templates
QuickTips®	Tri-fold brochures in English and Spanish	The Parent Institute®	Various, including: "Get Ready for the Parent-Teacher Conference" (2005), "Help Your Child Do Better on Tests" (2007), "Understanding Dyslexia" (2006), and "Teach Your Child the Responsibility of Remembering" (2006)
State department of education's parent's guide	31-page booklet	State department of education	Various, including: Policy and legislative initiatives, special education guidelines, gifted and talented guidelines
"Reading at Home: How Parents Can Help"	Flyer	WES Reading specialist	Checklist about home reading
"Net Cetera: Chatting with Kids About Being Online"	55-page paperback	United States Federal Trade Commission	Online safety
"Shining Stars: Second & Third Graders Learn to Read"	5-page booklet	National Institute for Literacy	Reading supports
Advertisements	Flyers	Private companies	Various, including: Childcare provider, nearby apartment complex

Strategies for Data Analysis

Analysis is an iterative process in which analysts review, interpret, and code data, look for themes, and/or apply theories. Researchers identify codes, themes, and other interpretations with the help of the literature. This study followed Creswell's (1998) and others' (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 2005) recommendations that researchers use constant comparisons and negative case analyses when analyzing qualitative data in case studies. Reflective memos and field notes aided in the analysis of collected data.

Open coding was the initial step of the investigation's analysis. In this phase, I formed beginning categories and subcategories of information based on the research questions. I taped, transcribed, and coded participant interviews in a manner that facilitated later relating priority creation, policy development, activity implementation, and program evaluation. For example, as I began to look at research question one, I created several copies of all transcripts and notes. Then, I read through every interview, field note, and document record and highlighted the passages that related to staff priorities. Coding in this fashion aligned the data with research questions.

Category construction was the second phase of analysis. I used my earlier coding paradigm to explore theoretical relationships units of information. I employed constant comparison within and among the categories in an attempt to tease out connections between priorities, policies, and practices. For example, as I compared the information about priorities that I highlighted, I noticed a theme about the structured activities that seemed to be mandates from the school district. Then, I started to group bits of information around this proposition.

The next stage of analysis was negative case analyses. As I began to develop propositions for each question, I searched for discrepant evidence to which I could compare my propositions

(Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 2005). According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), “Alternative explanations always exist; the researcher must search for, identify, and describe them, and then demonstrate how the explanation offered is the most plausible of all” (p. 157). I kept analytic memos that reflected the emphasis on the search for data that conflict with categories derived from the data.

Instances of disconfirming evidence did not necessarily disprove the proposed conclusions but they did require additional consideration of alternative explanations. This study attempted to present the best plausible connections between priorities, policies, programs and practices. That does not mean that every event within the system of study strictly adhered to my findings.

Researchers often present new theories in the form(s) of graphic organizers, story lines, and/or sets of propositions (Creswell, 1998; Tynan & O’Neill, 2007). At the conclusion of my data analysis, I did not generate a theory. However, I did offer several points of information about the relationship between Wilson Elementary School’s staff’s parent involvement priorities, policies, programs, and practices that I believe inform the literature about parent involvement and can be useful to others conducting similar research.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the integrity of the scholar’s product. Sometimes a scholar’s reputation can lend credibility to his or her work in the eyes of some audiences, but ultimately a study must be able to stand on its own merits. To the untrained audience, qualitative research can appear more subjective than quantitative methods (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Good researchers overcome the appearance of “over-subjectivity” by providing thick descriptions of the context of the case,

detailed presentations of data, and clear articulation of the logic models that drive study design, data collection, and data analysis.

Qualitative studies normally seek what some call analytic generalizations (Yin, 2003) or transferability (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Mertens, 2005) –the terms are used interchangeably in this proposal. Analytic generalizability means that a study proves useful to researchers or practitioners in contexts that are similar to the studied phenomenon. For example, this investigation used a small, self-selected theoretical sample that was unsuitable for statistical generalization. However, the study might be analytically generalizable (Yin, 2003) because of the relatively homogeneous nature of the sample (staff and parents of an elementary school that served low-income students) and the depth of information gathered through interviews. Subsequent studies should be able to compare data and/or conclusions drawn for similar purposes, from similar populations, or analyzed in a similar fashion.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) contend that transferability “rests more with the researcher who would make that transfer than with the original researcher” (p. 193). In other words, I might have provided a parent involvement document with practical and empirical utility, but the decision about usefulness will ultimately be made by schoolhouses, district offices, and academic audiences at later points in time. Nevertheless, the investigation presents data and conclusions that are hopefully useful to those interested in parent involvement.

In addition to the lack of statistical generalizability due in part to the small, self-selected sample, another limitation of the study was that I was the primary arbiter of what events were observed, what documents were reviewed, and which participants were interviewed. My own biases might have influenced the study’s outcomes. However, observer effects and data selection affect the trustworthiness of most qualitative studies. The role of the researcher is to establish

clear criteria for data collection and analysis. Even with such parameters in place, data collection and analysis remain somewhat intuitive in nature—researchers must sometimes make on-the-fly judgments about the use of probing questions, specific “look-fors” during observations, and/or other elements of the study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). High-quality studies design checks for bias and other limitations that might occur due to subjectivity (Murphy, 1980; Shulman, 1988).

As stated earlier, the investigation situated analyses within the context of the existing research, triangulated data, kept analytic memos, and used discriminant sampling (i.e., negative case analyses) to check for biases. In addition to those steps, the study also used thick descriptions, member checks, peer debriefing, and observation and interview protocols to buttress the study’s credibility.

Thick description is a hallmark of qualitative methodology. This dissertation attempts to present detailed data that provide intricate descriptions of the context. Thick descriptions of the case permit the inclined reader to draw independent conclusions that may align or deviate from the researcher’s analysis. In keeping with Marshall and Rossman’s (1999) recommendation, I kept two sets of memos. One set contained objective descriptions; the other included analytic and theoretical reflections on data. Even with copious descriptions, however, researchers cannot study every aspect of a given topic. Moreover, my choices about what to observe, and for how long, remained subjective. Thus, thick description was not a stand-alone check for bias.

Respondent validation was another critical component of this study’s implementation (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). In fact, Mertens (2005), who points out that validation can be as informal as verbally summarizing the content of an interview before parting company with a participant, describes member checks as “the most important criterion in establishing credibility” (p. 255). Maxwell (2005), on the other

hand, reminds researchers that “participants’ feedback is no more inherently valid than their interview responses; both should be taken simply as evidence regarding the validity of your account” (p.111). In this case, I summarized recorded content at the conclusion of each interview and gave participants opportunities to revise statements.

Peer debriefing sessions (Creswell, 1998; Mertens, 2005) also added to the credibility of this inquiry. I discussed and solicited feedback on methods, related literature, and analytic insights with colleagues who are graduates of University of Maryland doctoral programs. These conversations assisted in the revision of methods, wording, presentation and/or logic throughout the design, collection, analysis, and reporting phases of the research.

Despite whatever safeguards I could have included in this study, reliability and external validity would not have reached the standards of quantitative research designs. Replicability and statistical generalizability are inconsistent with qualitative assumptions. This dissertation does not present a firm reality that can be revisited by future researchers. The stakeholders of Wilson Elementary School created the school’s “reality” as each individual interacted with his or her respective environment. The people and environment of Wilson will change often, and therefore so will reality as it exists at WES. As Merriam (1998) wrote:

One of the assumptions underlying qualitative research is that reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured as in quantitative research. Assessing the isomorphism between data collected and the “reality” from which they were derived is thus an inappropriate determinant of validity. (p. 202)

Phenomena that occur within schools are dynamic; the traditional definition of reliability and external validity will not hold. A high-quality case study can strive for defensibility; that is, the research presents such a coherent procedure and clear chain of evidence that a reader views the scholar's conclusions as rational.

If this study presents defensible conclusions pertaining to the development, implementation and evaluation of parent involvement activities, then the study will make a significant contribution to parent involvement research and school practice. Schools claim to desire parent involvement, but they do not always understand how to undertake parent involvement activities most effectively. A study that clarifies some of the thought processes behind staff decision-making about educational involvement will equip school staff with some of the information they need to engender preferred parent involvement types and perhaps cultivate long-lasting alliances.

This section laid out the investigation's research design and limitations. The investigation captures the essence of the relationship between a school's parent involvement priorities, policies, programs, and practices. The report presents an informed perspective of the parent involvement phenomenon within a low-income, elementary school context. The next section summarizes the study's findings and how the findings relate to one another.

Chapter 4: Findings

The education literature presents parent involvement as a multidimensional phenomenon, and most school stakeholders report that parent involvement, in some form, is essential to school success (National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, 2006; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007). Still, there is a lack of clarity about the parent-school relationship variables that impact parent involvement at the school building level. This study used a case study design to analyze stakeholder perceptions of the development, implementation, and effectiveness of a low-income school's parent involvement activities. The purpose of this study was to consider stakeholder perceptions, particularly school staff, about the formulation, prioritization, implementation, and evaluation of parent involvement goals, strategies, and activities. The primary data sources for the study were semi-structured interviews. I interviewed individuals from five groups: parents, the principal, primary classroom teachers, intermediate classroom teachers, and a non-classroom special education resource teacher. The principal, one of the primary teachers, and one of the intermediate teachers were members of the school leadership team. In addition, I observed one of the parent involvement programs (Back to School Night) and reviewed school documents pertaining to parent involvement. Data collection and analysis were based on the following research questions:

1. How does the staff of a low-income school form parent involvement priorities, policies, and programs? To what extent do policies such as Title I, Race to the Top, and No Child Left Behind influence the formation of parent involvement priorities, policies, and programs?

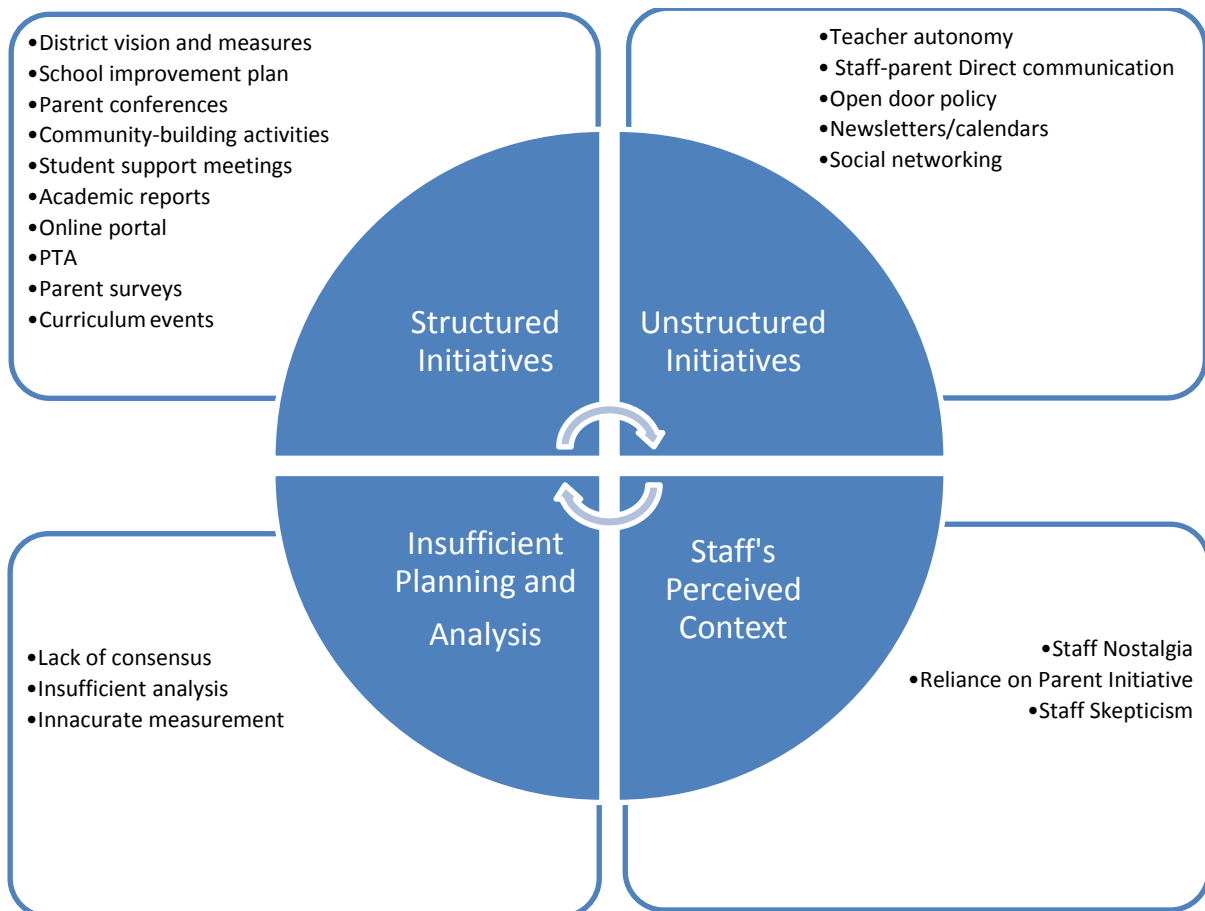
2. What types of parent involvement does the staff consider to be most important and why does it consider some forms of parent involvement more important than others? Does the staff have a collective vision of parent involvement?
3. How does the staff of a low-income school go about promoting different forms of parent involvement? What types of parent involvement invitations does school staff make to parents?
4. Which types of parent involvement programs and practices does the staff deem effective? What factors does the staff consider when evaluating the effects of programs and practices?

The observation, review of documents, and reports from participant interviews indicate that parent involvement was ostensibly a priority throughout SCPS and particularly at Wilson Elementary School (WES). To that end, both WES and SCPS designated energy toward parent involvement policies and practices. The parent involvement emphasis took the form of structured and unstructured goals, procedures, activities, and monitoring practices. I derived four themes or categories from my analysis of the data relevant to my research questions. To help organize these themes I constructed figure 4, which includes a description of each and key constructs related to the theme:

- 1) SCPS dictates priorities and established structures pertaining to parent involvement. WES' staff implemented the structures to the letter of the policy.

- 2) WES' staff supplemented SCPS policies with unstructured activities.
- 3) Despite structured and unstructured activities, WES' parents were involved at a low rate. The staff's nostalgia for the past, reliance on parent initiative, and skepticism about parent capacity to help – what I call the staff's perceived context – might have contributed to weak parent involvement outcomes.
- 4) Insufficient resources were dedicated to planning, monitoring, and analyzing parent involvement strategies at the school level.

Figure 4. The Influences on Parent Involvement at Wilson Elementary School



In this chapter, I describe the themes deduced from the data as they relate to the research questions. First, I present some of the structured and unstructured parent involvement programs that impacted WES' parents, students, and staff, as well as some parents' responses to these opportunities. Then, I explain how the staff's beliefs, changes in Title I status, and insufficient planning and analysis of programs might have influenced parent involvement. Lastly, I conclude the chapter with some summarizing statements.

Structured Parent Involvement Initiatives

According to participants, the SCPS central office dictated Wilson's parent involvement priorities through the imposition of structured parent involvement initiatives outlined in the district's master plan. Structured practices took the form of "must-dos" with respect to goals, policies, activities, and evaluations. At the district level, SCPS reportedly monitored the extent to which schools carried out activities that were in-line with the district's stated goals. With respect to structured policies that were specific to WES, the principal reportedly oversaw activities to make sure WES' policies were implemented. Structured activities included the documentation of a vision, establishment of goals, and description of mandatory activities, such as parent conferences and the establishment of a Parent Teacher Association (PTA). This section explains many of these structured activities in greater detail.

District vision. The school district set clear parameters for acceptable goals, strategies, and activities around parent involvement. In 1997, the local board of education created a policy that recognized "the necessity and value of parent and family involvement to support student success, optimal development, and academic achievement" (p. 1). From that point on, the board mandated that the superintendent include annual parent involvement updates to the board.

This commitment can also be found in the district's master plan. In the 2011-2012 school year, the district outlined its core values, two of which acknowledged the necessity of parent partnerships and the responsibility of all stakeholders to contribute to the school's success. The master plan presented strategies to strengthen partnerships with community stakeholders, such as an online parent information portal through which parents could find out information about their children and schools. The plan included other strategies as well, such as the promotion of parent teacher organizations and implementation of learning centers in which parents could learn about curricula and other school issues; many of these strategies required schools to coordinate activities with the district to promote parent involvement and new programs.

The school district policies appeared to have loosely influenced WES' parent involvement priorities. Although many of those interviewed could not say exactly who decided that the school should implement some strategies (curriculum nights, for instance), a common report among respondents was that such activities are traditions. Staff statements suggested that an ostensible emphasis on parent involvement is a part of the school district's culture. Ms. Toliver said, "I think that the school system kind of tells [the school] what the basic components should be, and [parent involvement] is one of them. Every school has to address [parents] in some way."

School improvement plan. Another one of the school district's strategies that was aimed, in part, to enhance parent involvement at school sites was a requirement for schools to create individual school improvement plans that aligned with the district's goals. In keeping with the policy of SCPS, Wilson developed a three-year school improvement plan, from the years 2010

through 2012.³ Increasing parent involvement was the fourth of five total goals of the plan. The other four goals related to reading, math, science, and career readiness, respectively. According to the plan, Wilson intended to increase parent involvement by increasing participation in the PTA; communicating with parents via phone, writing, and internet; conducting community outreach meetings; conducting parental information sessions; and participating in community bonding events. There were no raw numbers or percentages explicitly stated in the goals or strategies in the executive summary.

However, most individuals that I interviewed, including the principal and parents, did not mention the school improvement plan when describing how the school's parent involvement policies are developed, codified, or articulated. Only one set of teachers mentioned the school improvement plan: the primary teachers. When explaining how the school develops parent involvement priorities, Ms. Jackson said, "We have a school improvement plan, which I haven't seen a copy of it yet, and I know for our school improvement plan there is a component for parent involvement." Ms. Toliver also described the importance of the school improvement plan. She said it "tells [the school's] mission and where [the school's] focuses are. Certainly parent involvement...is a part of it." Although the interview took place during the second half of the school year, neither teacher had seen the school improvement plan nor could they describe the specific goals for parent involvement.

Student support meetings and parent conferences. SCPS – and Wilson by extension – created protocols for parents to participate in face-to-face communications with school staff. Some of those protocols involved student support meetings (SSMs), as mandated by the Individual with Disabilities Education Act; others encourage parents to attend formal

³ The plan's executive summary was reviewed, but no complete copy of the plan was made available for this study.

conferences with teachers to discuss their children's academic performance and behavior in school.

Student support meetings operate in a similar fashion to IEP meetings. During SSMs, key school staff, such as the reading specialist, principal, and teacher(s) sit together – often with parents – to discuss data, share insights, and brainstorm resolutions to concerns about particular students. Mr. Johnson said,

I may have a SSM for a kid because my question is, “What are we going to put together to take this kid to the next level?” But then I see a kid that's just been floundering and floundering; that parent needs to come in, because that parent might be saying, “If the school doesn't say anything, I won't say anything.” And if I don't say anything, then I'm not doing my job. So I at least need you to come in so that we can say, “You need to do this, this, and this.”

Two formal parent conference days are mandated by SCPS. They take place in the weeks following the first and second quarters, respectively. All schools are closed to students on each day. According to staff reports, parent attendance during these days varies from class to class and year to year; but generally, parents' responses to these opportunities are low.

Community-building activities. Wilson and its staff sponsored several activities during the school year to enhance the camaraderie and morale of the school community. The school produced mock quiz shows, sports contests, a board game night a school fair. By most reports, these activities were not well attended by families or were in jeopardy of being discontinued due to the loss on Title I funding.

For example, Family Game Night, the board game activity, was an event in which parents were invited to play board games with their children in the school's cafeteria. Mr. Johnson explained, "That's when parents come out and sit with their children, and other children, and just spend some quality time inside the school house with the young people." Family Game Night during the studied school year was sparsely attended by both parents and staff, according to the primary teachers. Ms. Duncan, the one interviewed teacher that attended the event, said that games were in short supply. "There weren't many games," she said, "so [the on-site child care provider] had to donate a few games to the game night."

The major culminating activity, the school fair, was called Family Fun Day. Mr. Johnson described it as "a day of family fun. We invite all of the parents to come out and spend some quality time with us as we close school down." Family Fun Day functions as a big cookout that provides an opportunity for staff, parents, and other stakeholders to bond in a relaxed atmosphere. However, Family Fun Day had not been scheduled as of January of the school year, and several staff were under the impression that Family Fun Day had been cancelled due to budget cuts when Wilson lost its Title I funding.

During the community-building events, Wilson staff sometimes attempted to foster more formal communications with parents. For instance, Ms. Jarrett explained, "In the past for certain events they've had like a table set up for parents to stop by and pick up a little information packet on your way out. [It's] nothing really serious. You don't want to bombard them and be really pushy; but we really need to be." Low levels of attendance at these activities limits the extent to which staff can use the events to circulate information to parents.

Academic reports, report cards and test information. Like all schools in SCPS, WES distributes student academic reports in the form of quarterly report cards. The school reading

specialist is also responsible for disseminating students' performance on benchmark exams twice each year. The milestone exams allow students, staff, and parents to gauge student's preparedness for yearly state tests. Mr. Johnson explained how "[The reading specialist] sends a letter home to all the parents letting them know where their children are as it relates to [test performance]." Mr. Taylor's statements dovetailed with the principal. She said, "We send the children's data home for the parents to see how they scored on [benchmark tests]. It pulls out their weaknesses so parents can have access to what their weaknesses are and how to strive to work on those weaknesses, not just the strengths."

According to respondents, some teachers send home weekly academic and behavior reports to families, as well. However, none of the respondents had sent home weekly reports at the time of the interviews. Also, no participant pointed out any effects from any academic reports on parents' involvement in the school. The general impression was that these are routinely scheduled reports that seldom prompt any specific communications with WES staff or interactions between WES staff and parents.

Online portal. The school district also provides an online parent tool through which parents may view information about their respective children. The website, called *School Connection*, is open seven days a week and 24 hours a day. According to Mr. Johnson, the application "provides parents an opportunity to look at their individual students' school work, disciplinary forms, [and] communicate back and forth with the teacher." In the words of Mr. Stewart, "The district utilized the [online tool] to provide parents with real-time information regarding students' grades, schedules, assignments, attendance, and transcripts." Mr. Johnson added, "*School Connection* provides parents an opportunity to look at their individual student's school work, disciplinary forms, communicate back and forth with the teacher..." Further, Ms.

Toliver explained, “You don’t have to wait for progress reports. You don’t have to wait for report cards. It [your child’s progress and behavior] should not be a surprise to you because you can look at any time.”

While SCPS did not make data about parents’ use of *School Connection* available to staff, some respondents expressed skepticism about the extent to which parents take advantage of the online portal. Ms. Taylor said, “There are plenty of things that parents have access to but don’t use. She also said, “We give the parents access; but whether they use it or not...They have access. You can do it from your phone, your computer at work, or in the library.” Ms. Toliver said, “I don’t know if anybody looks, but I want to know exactly how many people do actually look on that, and how many people do actually look on that on a regular basis...” There was little evidence that the school had concrete data about how often parents used the portal or in what ways they used the portal.

Parent Teacher Association. As mandated by SCPS, WES staff helps to operate and support a Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Several participants described the value of and support that the PTA offered to Wilson and its stakeholders. Mr. Johnson said, “The PTA provided us with a marquis. The school system was kind enough to put it in and we’re able to communicate with parents through that.” Mr. Stewart said, “[The PTA] provides programs where they do parental training and give suggestions about how parents could interact with their children, things they can do to help out with the school at home.”

Although all participants pointed to the PTA as a valuable way that parents could be involved, participants also described the PTA as underutilized by the parent community. One participant remarked, "Our PTA is horrible." Another described the PTA as “very weak.” Mr. Johnson said, “Each month we do have a PTA meeting, usually we have about 12 percent of our

population that participates in PTA.” However, other participants claimed the typical turnout to meetings was much lower.

Ms. Henson, the PTA president, acknowledged the lack of parent involvement at PTA meetings when she said, “At your standard issue PTA meeting, it’s usually me, the principal, and one other parent, because that’s not the priority.” Ms. Henson went on to joke that she one day plans to invite a famous R & B performer to a PTA meeting to increase attendance. Ms. Taylor also expressed her frustration with PTA attendance, stating, “We have a very weak PTA. I think at our last PTA meeting we had two parents.” Mr. Stewart added, “With the amount of parents that come [to PTA meetings], a lot of times it’s only the board members that are there.”

Bi-annual parent surveys. Every two years, SCPS surveys its parents to gain the parents’ perspectives pertaining to school climate. Twenty-six Wilson Elementary School parents responded to the survey during the year prior to this study. Of the 26 respondents, 25 answered questions about the school’s parent involvement practices. Sixty percent of the 25 respondents reported that the school staff encouraged parents to support the school’s instructional activities. However, less than half of the parents think that the school adequately communicated with parents. The staff members who responded to the survey supported the parents’ sentiments. Half of the 12 respondents reported that the school staff adequately communicates with parents. During the course of participant interviews, no participant – parents or staff – mentioned the surveys at all. Whether because the response rates are low or because the surveys are not seen as a source of reliable information, they appear to provide more symbolic than meaningful feedback to staff about parent involvement,

Curriculum/skill development events. Curriculum nights appear to be recommended by SCPS. According to the master plan, “Each school hosts a Back-to-School Night program at the

beginning of the school year to share school trend data ... Parents are also encouraged to participate in curriculum nights, hosted by many schools, throughout the school year” (p. 289). The school district’s strategic plan also stated that schools would “offer many hands-on opportunities for parents to experience the lessons and skills students are taught each quarter” (p. 289).”

In response, WES invited parents into the building to view the types of things that regularly transpire in classes. Parents had opportunities to see and hear about the types of instruction that took place, inquire about curriculum and testing protocols, learn tips for helping their children at home, and/or check-in with the teacher to discuss the progress of individual students. According to the staff, informational and skill-building events such as these are key chances for parents to learn how to align their respective goals and activities with the school in order to improve outcomes for their children. For example, Mr. Johnson described “a night where the parents come in and they work on their computer skills.” There was no direct instruction, but staff attended to assist parents as they worked independently on computers.

WES employs curriculum presentation events in two forms: Wilson Day and State Test Nights. Each is designed to get parents involved in their children’s academic work, especially preparation for the state tests. During Wilson Day, parents are invited to school on a Saturday. Mr. Stewart explained how “parents come with children and [teachers] do lessons... Parents actually sit in and observe the kinds of strategies and objectives that the children participate in order to get ready for the state test.” Mr. Johnson added, “That’s a day in which we talk about college readiness, career readiness, what we do in class, and what instruction looks like.”

Wilson holds State Test Nights twice during each year. There is a reading night and a math night. The staff, and sometimes students, explain curricular objectives, demonstrate strategies, and play games that are designed to show how parents can supplement school

activities while students are at home. Some staff viewed State Test Nights as a “spoonful of sugar” approach to disseminating helpful information to parents. Like Ms. Jackson, who said, “I think it’s just a way to pull parents into the school; and once parents are there, we try to give parents some information about things they can do for their children.”

Unstructured Parent Involvement Initiatives

In addition to the structured policies imposed by the central office and principal, the staff at Wilson Elementary School promoted desired forms of parent involvement by implementing additional unstructured activities ostensibly designed to enhance parent involvement at home and school. These unstructured practices appeared to be loosely based on the same district and school goals and stated beliefs. Some parent involvement efforts were classroom-level decisions made by individual teachers. For instance, one teacher sent home homework charts and reading logs. Another used a Facebook-like software application through which all of her students are members in a virtual classroom. Other teachers partnered with a local pizza franchise to employ a reading incentive program that required parent involvement. This section details some of the unstructured programs through which WES staff attempted to facilitate parent involvement.

Teacher teams. At the classroom level, teachers themselves exercise some degree of autonomy in regards to parent involvement. Some teachers point out that grade level teams are also responsible for setting parent involvement priorities. Ms. Taylor and Mr. Stewart explained how their respective teams of teachers meet twice each week to discuss both curricular and extracurricular topics. Team members conduct informal needs assessments by looking at student achievement data, sharing anecdotes, and reviewing policies. Then teammates brainstorm next steps, which sometimes include parent involvement activities. When asked who determines

parent involvement activities, Ms. Taylor explained, “It depends... We [operate] as a fifth grade team.”

Mr. Stewart described a similar process that occurs in the intermediate grades. As for his team,

We look at the [district benchmark test] results. We pull out the skills that the children didn't master. Those are the ones that you want to focus in the classroom. We send the information to the parents. [We] let them know the results of the test. We let them know what their children are deficient in, and that these are the things that we are going to be working on in class. [Students] will have activities they will be bringing home and could [parents] do their part to help, give them some assistance.

Most of these unstructured activities involved alerting parents about problems or encouraging parents to provide assistance with homework.

Staff-parent direct communication. Teacher-parent direct communication took the form of emails, phone calls, letters and notes, and face-to-face conversations. Some of the communication described by staff focused on one-way dissemination of information from the school to the parents. Participants described robocalls, the online information system, marquis outside of the school, and phone calls from the school for disciplinary reasons as examples of direct communications. Ms. Taylor described how the entire staff is involved with communication to parents, but each of her examples involved one-way communications. She said,

We give the kids opportunities to go home and tell the parents. We send out newsletters to their parents. [The assistant principal] is the testing coordinator.

She sends out the information on testing. Mr. Johnson does the robocalls. The custodians change the signs outdoors. So it's a whole staff depending on what's happening in our grade level or what's happening in the school. That is how the teachers get the parents involved.

Although many of the examples provided by staff involved one-way communications, staff also mentioned the importance of two-way communications, especially if it resulted in receiving potentially-helpful information from the parents, such as students' interests, home lives, learning styles, health issues, or other life circumstances. For instance, Ms. Duncan said,

I think it's always better to keep somebody informed versus not. If you're working constantly, then let me know. Then I know that I'm not going to see you because you work at night; or so and so doesn't have transportation, so I'm not going to see them as often; or they don't have a computer at home. It would be better for you to say why you can't participate rather than not say anything and I have to assume that you just don't care.

Ms. Toliver, however, explained how some face-to-face communications can be intimidating or difficult for parents to understand, and she blamed teachers and administrators for being "all hung up in teacher language" that can confuse parents.

Sometimes I think that you have to just speak in plain language. Just like when we teach the children that when they are writing or they're speaking, they're considering their audiences and purposes. It's kind of the same thing... Parents, they just want to know, point blank, just bring it down. Tell me where I am, where I need to be... Sometimes you see parents and they're sitting and they're

[nodding] “um hmm,” but really their faces are saying I have no clue what you’re talking about.

Nonetheless, staff remarks suggested that some staff did have knowledge of students’ personal circumstances, presumably because staff had engaged with parents in conversations that provided an important context for understanding a students’ behavior. For example, Ms. Jackson conveyed a sense of helplessness by detailing some of the things she hears from the parents of some of her students.

Since the beginning of the year and having conversations with some of my children’s parents, the home lives are just shattered. I sometimes wonder how children can even come in and function with what I’m hearing is going on at home and what the parents are going through.

Ms. Jarrett described a conversation with an unemployed parent who was struggling to educate multiple children at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

I was talking to a parent last night. She has seven [children] between [age] 18 and [age] 6, the one in my room. She doesn’t look older than me and I’m 32. I was telling her... I just really haven’t seen much progress. No homework coming in. No book bag. No folder. All of this type of stuff missing...The first time I saw you was yesterday when he came up missing on the bus... I was just kind of talking to her. She was very receptive to what I was saying, but [she] didn’t realize that [her] child was a little behind? And she said she was just trying to stay afloat. [I’m] trying to get this job. [I’m] trying to get the oldest one who is in high school getting ready to graduate. [I’m] trying to get her from school and making sure that they were alright. She had kind of been slipping in this area.

Telephone calls. The most often cited use of the telephone was the robocall system of information sharing. A staff member, in most cases Mr. Johnson, recorded a message that was relayed to targeted populations (e.g. parents of particular grade levels, all parents, all parents and staff) via telephone at a predetermined time. Mr. Johnson said, “We’ve been fortunate enough to obtain a robocall system; prior to that we were just doing newsletters and flyers. Now I’m able to call every home and indicate what is going on as it relates to the school.” Ms. Taylor said, “We send a robocall that calls about things like activities.” She later said, “The principal does the robocall.”

Sometimes two-way calls took place between individuals. “Each classroom has a telephone to contact parents,” according to Mr. Johnson. In addition, teachers are mandated to come in 30 minutes before students enter classrooms and stay 30 minutes after dismissal. This is the infrastructure in place to facilitate telephone conversations between parents and teachers. In some cases, parents take advantage of the phone system. For instance, Ms. Jackson stated, “I had a parent on the phone. She called me and said, ‘Please help me’...So this was a parent that was interested and I gave her [strategies she could use]...”

In another example of parent initiative, Mr. Stewart said,

We have parents that if they feel like [homework] is difficult for them, they’ll call the school. They’ll tell the teacher maybe, ‘I didn’t understand that; could you give me some feedback,’ or, ‘Could you give me some more information so that I could help [the student].’ A lot of [parents] are willing to try to help out.

On the other hand, when staff took the initiative to call parents, it was usually for a disciplinary reason. Ms. Jackson said, “I know our vice principal always [calls] parents to come

in and shadow a student, and often times, [parents] will...and that's behavior-related." Mr. Stewart added,

I really believe that most parents are trying to bring their children up in the right way but children today are exposed to so many things. Sometimes when we call the parent concerning incidents that happen in school, they don't really believe that their children could have been involved in such things. But I think if they would come to the school...you'll be surprised with some of the stuff you might observe children do when the parents are not around.

Email. Email is a communication tool used in schools throughout many major metropolitan areas, and it is available at WES. Staff and parent participants had access to email because each participant used email to communicate with me as we set up interview times. However, few participants mentioned the use of email during the interview process.

When explaining the efficiency of email, Mr. Johnson said,

Each teacher has an email that they can use to contact parents...It cuts down on the parent conferences, but it's more efficient and effective. Where I use to have 10 parent conferences that would last 30 minutes, now I can talk to 20 parents via email in less time...My policy is that if you email me today, I get back to you today. So whatever happens, if you make an attempt to get with me, I will definitely get with you.

Ms. Toliver added,

I think that it is so important, so critically important, that we work together. In this age of emerging technology it's going to be really fundamental that we make the best use of everything that we have available to us. When I first started

teaching, I couldn't imagine being able to [air typing] and send a note off to a parent...But now I can say [air typing], 'ding'. And that was just like so unimaginable. I really think we have to keep pace with all of that because I do think that, especially in a school environment where sometimes there is only one parent and that parent is working, or there are two working parents. You've got to get in where you can fit in.

None of the classroom teachers described the use of email for communicating with parents. Mr. Johnson explained how he used email; and Ms. Toliver emphasized the need for keeping up with current forms of communication. The extent to which other staff used email is unclear.

Open door policy. Most participants mentioned WES' open door policy as evidence of its invitational atmosphere. Mr. Johnson said,

We are an open door school, so we make ourselves available. The only time that [parents] have to make an appointment is when we are scheduling a meeting for [the parents]. However, if [parents] want to come in, usually we make ourselves available... Parents come after school to talk to our staff. The staff will come in 30 minutes before school and 30 minutes after school to meet with parents.

Mr. Johnson described how he set up a table in the main lobby in order to make the school appear more welcoming to parents. "I didn't want parents just coming into the main office, sign their kids in, and take them to class. So we put a table out there [in the lobby]. We put a greeter out there," he explained. Past greeters have included the guidance counselor and the chief custodian.

Other staff echoed the comments of the principal. Mr. Stewart said, “I think the school does go out and offer parents an invitation. Mr. Johnson always says it’s an open door policy, so parents can come to the school at any time and visit.” Ms. Taylor said, “We have an open door policy. At least [my grade level] team is telling the parents that if there’s something your kids are coming home and saying, ‘I don’t get how she teaches it,’ we more than welcome the parents to come in and sit in the classroom.” Ms. Duncan expressed statements that suggested an amount of teacher buy-in to the policy. “I think real parent involvement means you have parents moving in and out like a revolving door. You come in. You come out. Volunteer. Things like that.”

Ms. King, one of the parent participants, articulated a similar sentiment when she said, “The door is always open...There is always someone to say I’ll help or high five you or a pat on the back...Here I feel like I’m in a family.” Ms. Henson agreed, “This is the only school that I’ve ever been to where you can walk in, ask to see the principal, and actually see the principal...there is always a time where you can talk to somebody.”

Newsletters and calendars. The school district’s strategic plan stated that parent involvement would be improved, in part, by the communication “with parents via [robocalls], written notifications, and newsletters.” WES adheres to newsletter policy by distributing flyers that introduced WES to the parents and inform them about upcoming events. Mr. Stewart said, “At the beginning of the year, [the school] sends out a newsletter welcoming the parents to the new year. We give suggestions as to some of the things parents can do to be involved in school.” Ms. Taylor said, “[The school] sends newsletters home, just keeping parents aware of different things that are going on in the building.”

Mr. Johnson also allowed teachers to send home classroom newsletters, although no participant claimed to have sent or received any regularly distributed classroom newsletters. Ms.

Jackson said that some teachers sent home weekly homework calendars and reading logs to alert parents about expectations for home activities. Also, some teachers participated in a reading incentive program with a national chain restaurant. When parents certified that students met a reading goal, the teachers provided students with a free pizza coupon from the restaurant.

Some teachers expressed dissatisfaction with these forms of communication because they were not consistently scheduled and used less frequently than in the past. Ms. Jackson said,

Actually, I was thinking about years ago we were required to send home [newsletters]. I know that we all don't have time for this now. But we were required to send home a monthly newsletter, either by grade level or individually. You had to send it home and we had a newsletter that went home from the school, and the students who accomplished things were listed...Parents took pride in that and they wanted their children mentioned; so they would work more with them. Those kinds of things we don't do any more.

Social networking. One teacher mentioned how she uses social media to connect with students and their parents. Ms. Taylor uses an online site that is similar to Facebook, but claims an academic purpose. Every student in the class is given a page through which they can communicate with the teacher, share ideas with classmates, receive assignments, etc. According to Ms. Taylor, all of her students have created pages, and most students log on regularly. However, she also indicated that the online network has not worked in a way she had anticipated, primarily because she has had difficulty getting parents to use the system. Ms. Taylor asked, "If the kids are on there, why aren't the parents?" She added, "It's said that [children] have all this access, and their parents can get on Facebook. [Parents] are on Facebook all of the time. If they can get on Facebook, then why can't they do this?" Social networking was not a broad theme

deduced from the data; but it was notable that one teacher used it and Mr. Johnson granted the teacher the latitude to do so.

No Child Left Behind and Title I

With respect to No Child Left Behind, and Title I therein, several participants alluded to the significance of funding and testing based on the federal law. The funding, according to several staff members and a parent, was responsible for several parent involvement activities in prior years, and the funding was also used to pay for a parent liaison. When SCPS revised its Title I guidelines, thereby revoking WES' Title I status, staff conveyed that parent involvement activities were significantly affected.

Ms. King, the PTA president, was under the impression that the loss of Title I funding was due, in part, to the lack of general parent involvement in WES and the dearth of parent outcry during SCPS' Title I decision-making process. She explained,

I had encouraged a lot of parents to come to that [school leadership] meeting. I said, 'You need to come to that meeting because the county's going to be cutting some funding, and we don't have our Title I anymore, so we're going to lose some teachers. Come and voice your opinion about what the children need...'

We're in that wavering of our Title I because we're not getting the parental involvement to reinforce the stuff that's being taught during the day...

Part of the effect of the loss of Title I funding was evident by the reduction of parent-related activities in the building. For instance, the intermediate teachers said that the loss of funding affected school-sponsored family tutoring activities and state-test-themed community events. Ms. Taylor said, "We had more parents involved [in the past] because we did things like

Community Day or [State Test] Day, tutoring, and that kind of thing. Because we can't fund it this year, it's not happening." Mr. Stewart described the likely loss of the tutoring day, stating,

We had it last year. I don't know if we're going to have it this year, but this was on a Saturday, where parents come with their children and we do lessons... We have the parents actually sit in and observe the kinds of strategies and objectives... to actually see how things have changed from when they were going to school.

Although some of these activities were still included as part of WES' structured opportunities for parents, they were reduced in scope and occurred less frequently.

Some teachers also described how the loss of Title I status resulted in a reduction of staff, particularly the parent liaison. According to several participants, the parent liaison was an integral component of WES' parent involvement ecosystem. It was she who bridged any gaps between community members and staff in an effort to generally support WES' goals and engender good will among stakeholders. Ms. Jackson said, "Last year, or the year before, we had a parent liaison. Because of the budget, that's gone. She did some things to bring parents in and connect them with resources in the community and that was very helpful. Mr. Stewart added, "Because we lost the bodies, parents don't volunteer."

The other primary impact of NCLB was seen through the lens of standardized testing, a focus that was sharpened due to the failure to achieve adequate yearly progress in the preceding school year. Wilson's staff clearly understood the need to improve students' test scores. To that end, staff directed most parent involvement activities toward communication about test performance, with the implication that learning at home would take place. The intermediate teachers, special education teacher, and the principal described how the school communicated with parents vis-à-

vis the district's standardized testing. For example, Mr. Johnson said, "When we do test scores—we just did [a benchmark test]—Ms. Toliver sends a letter home to all the parents letting them know where their children are as it relates to basic, proficient, and advanced."

Ms. Taylor offered her opinion on communication as well.

We send the children's data home for the parents to look at the data on how they scored on [state testing] benchmarks and it pulls out [students'] weaknesses; so parents can have access to what their weaknesses are and how to strive to work on those weaknesses, not just the strengths...Parents need to be aware just like the kids need to be aware...So in addition to the report cards we're sending home results of the basic, proficient, and things like that.

Since WES was in the first year of school improvement due to the failure to make AYP, there was presumably increased pressure on Wilson's staff, particularly Mr. Johnson, to improve test scores. Mr. Stewart pointed out the emphasis on testing, and the way in which the loss of Title I funding made it more difficult to provide sufficient support for students.

We have lost a lot of our extra support because we are no longer a Title I school.

Any monies that we had that we could use to facilitate additional help in the school...This is the time we're getting ready for testing for the state test...

Everything is revolving around that right now...Everything is testing designed.

It's geared toward the test and [student] achievement on this test.

There was also some indication that high-stakes testing was creating tension between staff and parents, at least from the staff's point of view. For example, Mr. Johnson complained about the choice component of NCLB. He expressed frustration with how the policy resulted in schools getting uninvolved and under-performing students. He mentioned,

You start breaking it down. It could be 3 kids. It could be 1 kid that hits me 3 times [based on demographic categories]. But [the powers that be] don't say that, and they want to move all these kids back and forth [within the framework of school choice]. A lot of times, the parent who is really involved, they [sic] keep their kid here. The parent who is a problem, they move their kid to the other school, thinking it's the school. It's never the school. I call it instructional cancer. So if you really look at what's been going on since No Child Left Behind, you'll watch a school that's been in good standing, become a choice school, and go right into school improvement. Why is that?

Ms. King echoed Mr. Johnson's aggravation as she articulated the need for parents to take a more active role in their children's education. According to her, parents do not understand the importance of testing and how it affects the school.

... parents don't get their kids here on time during test days. I've literally seen them drop children off 8:30. Testing's been underway. You've got to have your children here on time. They need to have a good night's rest the night before, and a have good meal to fuel them for the day. Testing is serious business and parents need to understand, your child can excel every day in class, but when that test comes, and they don't excel at that test, the school—well, not just so much the school—but it's looked at like your child doesn't know the things that we think they know

Ms. King continued to link parent involvement to academic performance in her discussion of WES' mandated school improvement plan. To her parents can be involved

in many ways, but the most important way is in helping their children do better academically.

So we've got to make that connection of there's more to life than playing sports, or singing or dancing. All that stuff is great, but [academics] are where it's at. I mean, we've got to shift the focus a little bit, because when we have dancing or singing or something? Or like a concert? Oh this place is packed! You can't get a parking space or anything! So, I'm like, "You'll come see your kid sing, but you won't come see your kid in a spelling bee?" [It's a question of] priorities again.

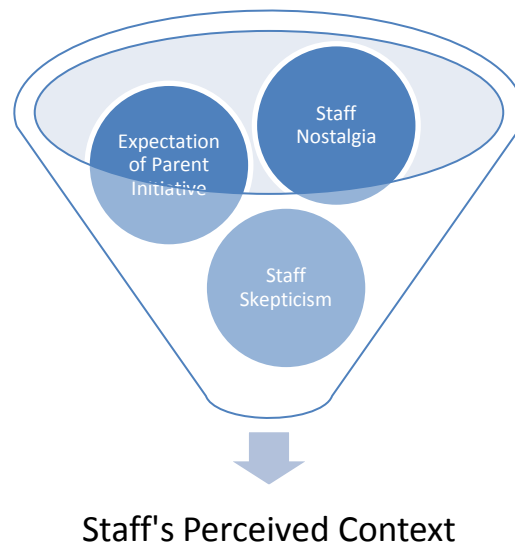
Certainly, federal policies such as NCLB, Title I, and, most recently, the Race to the Top funding initiative have consequences for parent involvement, but WES staff experienced many of these consequences indirectly through the policies and structured activities required by SCSD. Although several interviewees mentioned their disappointment for the loss of Title I status and the required emphasis on testing, staff seem largely unaware of how the broader policies affect parent involvement. Nonetheless, the loss of Title I funding appears to have significantly affected the scope and frequency of parent involvement activities at the school; the loss of the parent liaison also appeared to diffuse responsibility for parent involvement without any one person being responsible for coordinating parent involvement. Finally, the pressure to raise test scores due to the school's failure to make AYP makes parent involvement in the areas of testing and learning a priority. While other forms of involvement are recognized as important by staff, helping to increase test scores and supporting instruction was a common theme.

Staff Perceptions of Parent Involvement

Respondents were very willing to share their respective opinions about the most important ways parents should be involved in education. The primary forms of parent involvement desired by staff were to support students' physical and emotional needs, as well as participate in extra-school activities that support the educational curricula. Most of the desired support took place at home, but teachers also wanted parents present in school to learn about curricular content and teachers' perspectives. De Gaetano (2007) would call this type of parent support *Informal Involvement*; while Epstein would likely label the desired forms of involvement as *Parenting, Learning at Home*, and *One-way Communication*.

The staff's vision for parent involvement ostensibly originated with both the school district's master plan and WES' school improvement plan. However, participant comments shed light on an unwritten collective vision: what I refer to as the staff's perceived school context. The rest of this section is devoted to describing how the perceived school context of WES impacted the types of parent involvement desired by school personnel. Figure 5 displays how the staff's perceived context included: staff nostalgia about their own childhoods, an expectation of parent initiative in involvement opportunities, and skepticism about the degree to which parents could, or would like to, be involved with school.

Figure 5. The Elements of Staff's Perceived School Context



Staff nostalgia. Coincidental with participants' stories about parents were staff comparisons to staff's own family experiences. In almost every comparison, staff expressed nostalgia for the forms of participation that they recalled, accurately or not, that adults engaged in when they were children. Research by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler and others suggest that parents' remembrances of their childhood experiences with schools influence their involvement practices. Several respondents made statements that suggest that teachers' respective upbringings influenced their involvement expectations of their students' parents.

Several teachers nostalgically reflected on their own experiences as children. The staff described how their biological parents engaged in their education. For example, Ms. Jarrett said,

I remember growing up in a two parent home with both parents working
... that was no excuse for you to come home without having your
homework done or go to school without having your homework done
because if ... my parents got a call from the teacher, "Your daughter is

cutting up. Your daughter is not doing work.” That’s my tail! I knew that!
But I think times have kind of changed to where it is not as important.
Discipline is not there. ...My father always told me children want and
need discipline. Where is it?

Mr. Stewart described how an adult in his life helped him deal with his mother’s death.

A lot of [parents] want to be the child’s friend instead of the parent. I have
a problem with that because I’m from the old school. I know how I was
raised and some of the things that I see...never would have happened with
my mother when I was coming up...My mother passed when I was
[young] and at that time I was in high school. I felt that my life had ended
there...I was working in a grocery store and the guy that I was working for
took an interest in me. He said you know what your mother would not
want you to just give up and throw your life away. So that was my
motivation...From there I went on to college...

Ms. Toliver described her experience as a child and as a parent. She focused less on
involvement in school and more on making sure children were prepared to learn.

I actually think that the most important ways that parents need to be
involved in their children’s education really doesn’t have a whole lot to do
with the school per se; but that they send me a slate that is ready to work.
And by that I mean children who have those basic levels of needs met. ...
I’m old now and I’m reflective and I reflect on things that happen in my
own life and I know that life could not have been so easy for my parents
but I never knew that we were poor. I never you know I never knew that

we were struggling. . . . But I do think that all of those things are just so important, that children feel safe. It's important that they're rested. It's important that they feel secure.

Ms. Toliver also compared her personal parental experiences to those of her students and their parents. For instance, she said,

Now in school, you send your students in with the basic tools that they need. Again, even in raising my own daughter. It is unacceptable for you to leave my house, telling me you're going to school, and you don't have a pencil, a backpack, a binder, some paper, and some basic things; because this is your business right now, so you need to be prepared for your business. And I often wonder, "What are parents actually looking at when they look at their children and they're leaving for school?"

Some research suggests that parent involvement rates have remained relatively consistent during the last few decades; however, the teachers who mentioned how their own parents were involved in schools, or they were involved in schools, all described experiences that they perceived to be more engaged and positive than what they experience with the parents of their students. Perhaps the staff's positive remembrances of their parents in schools influenced the teachers' decisions to choose education careers. But it would be a leap of logic to believe that all parents during the staff members' childhoods were heavily involved in their children's educations.

Expectation of parent initiative. The assertion at WES was that staff and parents will work within and beyond the structured parent involvement initiatives to carve out involvement methods that best provide support for students. However, one might conclude that the implicit

messages were that teachers played their parts by coming to work prepared to teach, but staff relied on the parents to step forward and support the staff. Many of the forms of involvement described by staff required little initiative by teachers or administrators but placed responsibility on parents to support staff efforts.

Several staff members emphasized the necessity of parenting – a home activity – as the most important way that parents should be preemptively involved. For instance, Ms. Jarrett said parents should,

really spend time with [their children] ... Ask [children], “How was your day?” when they come home... Just ask them, “What did you learn today?” Something that simple can make a big difference because then they know, “My mom cares about me and asked me how my day was.”

From the staff perspective, parenting was clearly a key expectation of parent involvement, but parent participants also emphasized the importance of parenting as a form of parent involvement. Ms. Henson said, “You’ve got to have your children here on time, they need to have a good night’s rest the night before and a good meal to fuel them for the day.”

Beyond parenting, staff relied on parents to proactively place emphasis on learning at home, to teach children at home. If parents were to be seen, it was to gain a better understanding of how they could support learning at home. “Our perspective is that realistically we want parents to at least get involved at home if [they are] not able to get here to school.” This statement by Ms. Duncan, a primary teacher, seemed to be the prevailing sentiment among all participants. For example, Ms. Toliver said,

I do think that certain foundations of prior knowledge are kind of parents’ responsibility a little bit, because certainly you don’t want your child to

come to Pre-K and this is the first time that they've had somebody read a story to them...I think that there are a lot of ways to give your children a background.

In their focus group, primary teachers also emphasized the importance of learning at home. When asked about some of the most important ways that parents can be involved, Ms. Jackson explicitly stated, "Read with them at home." Ms. Duncan followed Ms. Jackson's statement with, "Let [children] see [parents] reading. Let [children] see [parents] doing work, trying to spell out things, or sound out things."

Mr. Johnson voiced an opinion that also stressed learning at home, stating that parents should,

not so much be visible [at school], but be there and understand what we're doing and trust us as a school and what we do...We have a parent contract. The parent signs the contract that says, "I'm going to provide a workspace for my child. I'm going to provide a certain time for my child to sit at his workspace. I'm going to provide the materials needed for this workspace.

When parents were to be "visible", it was often to facilitate learning at home. Mr. Stewart said,

We want parents to come and do hands-on [activities] so they can actually experience some of the demands that are put on the students...so [parents] will come in and the class and they will do they activity and participate with the children and they can really see the levels of difficulty...When

they get home or when the child has another assignment, then [parents] can help.

Still, staff did express desires for parents to visit the school to interact with their children's teachers in face-to-face fashion, but in most of these instances, it was the responsibility of parents to make the contact. Teachers expressed frustration with the lack of proactive parent communication. For example, Ms. Jarrett said,

We're in January. I told her I shouldn't have seen you just for the first time yesterday. You should have been up here...She said her child was having a hard time reading at home. I said I would go get some books, [and asked], "What is it that I need to do for you to help make this process easier?"

Mr. Stewart also conveyed his aggravation with the lack of parent outreach to him and other staff members. He said,

For some children, I haven't met the parents one time all year; and here we go it's in the third quarter. It's unfortunate, but it's reality. With some parents, the only time you hear from them is if something happens with the child or the child gets in trouble.

Ms. Duncan added,

It [exasperates me because] I have to beg people to come in because, I mean, this is your child. If you don't care about this child and her education, who is? It's more than just looking pretty. You dress them up. They have nice earrings. But they can't read and that's a problem. Why should I have to tell you?

Ms. Duncan said, "I think the main priority is to be involved as far as checking with the teacher, following up with assignments, enforcing things that we do in school." Ms. Toliver

wanted parents in the building for purposes “beyond showing up for the birthday party.” She said parents should spend time in classrooms so that they know how their children are performing.

Ms. Taylor said she did not want parents to wait,

for report cards and progress reports. Usually that’s the only time I hear from parents. Check in every week or weekly. Make sure that [parents] are helping [students] with their homework no matter what grade they’re in. Check their school bag and their classwork and their returned assignments to let them know . . . the steps that we’re taking to achieve their success.

Ms. Jarrett said, “Parents need to make themselves visible. . . Even if [parents] could just pop up one day. At least one day out of the 180 we’re here. You’re off on at least one of those days so make yourself visible. Let your child know that this is not a joke. You need your education. This is important.”

In all of these examples, parents had the primary responsibility for initiating involvement. Whether it was in the home through parenting or teaching, or visiting schools to support the activities of teachers, staff described forms of involvement that relied on parents to demonstrate initiative.

Staff skepticism. Staff reports indicated concern with parents’ inclination and ability to serve as learning supports at home. Several participants indicated that the parents’ lack of knowledge was due, in part, to the limited parent attendance during curriculum-focused school involvement activities in comparison to the turnout at events that showcase student talent and emphasize community building and/or entertainment. In the words of Mr. Johnson,

I think parents are scared of instruction. If I have an instructional night, I might get 15 parents. And I’m talking about data. I’m talking about grades and test

scores. If I have a talent show, it's standing room only. That is where we feel comfortable.

Mr. Johnson later said that some "parents [were] in the classrooms to see what the instructional piece looks like," but it was a relatively small percentage of the population.

Other respondents echoed Mr. Johnson's thoughts about the lack of parent participation at instruction activities relative to entertainment showcases. Ms. Taylor detailed some of her experiences with curriculum discussions. "We have a [state test] annual thing. We do it on a Saturday. We have a big turnout...like we had 10 parents from each grade level. But you're talking 400 kids...to us that is a big turn out." Ms. Duncan mentioned a similar issue, saying, "So many [parents] manage to come out when there are performances or whatever, but just for a regular informative type of meeting, it's really hard to get parents in with that." Ms. Henson remarked, "We've got to make that connection of there's more to life than playing sports, or singing, or dancing...so I'm like, 'You'll come to see your kid sing, but you won't come see your kid in a spelling bee?'"

At other times, staff conveyed explicit skepticism of the extent parents wanted to be involved at all. In one case, Ms. Taylor said, "The doors are open but [parents] don't take the advantage of it." In another instance, Ms. Jackson said, "There are parents that are interested. They're just such a minority now." Ms. Duncan presented her thoughts in more detail.

I think if parents had a different perception of school and education, that would really help...I think it's kind of like a tug and war with parents and teachers sometimes...They don't want to get involved because [they are afraid they will] come up there and say the wrong thing or something like that; so they would rather not get involved.

When parents did attempt to volunteer in classrooms, some staff communicated ambivalence toward the prospect of managing parent support. Ms. Jackson said,

I have 27 students right now. I could use an extra pair of hands. The problem is...it is very difficult to get some parents to know what the boundaries are and it's like having another child in the room that I have to direct.

Ms. Duncan interjected, "As a teacher you can get really defensive. For a long time I was like, 'I don't need your help.'"

Staff complaints about parents suggested a perceived lack of agency on the part of parents. It seems as if some staff were highly skeptical about the prospect of proactive parent engagement. For example, when asked if the school communicates priorities to parents, Ms. Duncan said, "I think to some degree the school has gotten away from that because you can't do much about what is going on at home. We can't control what Ms. So and So is teaching her child." Ms. Jarrett said, "You can't make parents [work with their children at home]. You can make suggestions." Mr. Johnson said, "Parent involvement [opportunities are] available; but we as a school don't look at it as a crutch, because we say, 'We need to do, whether the parents do or not.'"

Lack of Planning, Monitoring, and Analysis

According to SCPS, the predominant metric of the effectiveness of parent involvement programs is the number of participants. Depending on the activity, the participants could be parents, staff, or schools. For example, SCPS keeps track of the number of parents that attend school events, the number of PTOs in its schools, and the number of home visits conducted by its

parent liaisons. The following passage from the SCPS master plan exemplifies the reliance on participation numbers to gauge the success of parent involvement goals, strategies, and activities.

Progress in family and community engagement was observed in several areas. SCPS increased PTO membership by 3,544 parents in SY2009-10. Parent liaisons reported that schools developed 242 partnerships to support the local schools... Outreach to the diverse SCPS community improved through expanded translation services. Over 3,000 individual interpreting assignments were fulfilled by interpreters in up to 60 languages. This represents an increase of 1,795, as compared to the number of interpreting assignments that were fulfilled in SY2008-09.

Table 3 displays the accomplishments listed by SCPS in its master plan, although no participation data specific to Wilson Elementary School was included in the master plan.

Table 3. Parent Involvement Accomplishments Listed in the SCPS Master Plan

<p>2009-2010 Accomplishments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 92,940 parents attended school events/activities• 15,100 parents attended workshops facilitated by parent liaisons• 19,778 classroom observations/visits were made by parents• 4,853 fathers and significant role models visited their child’s classrooms during the first annual Men Make A Difference Day <p>Make A Difference Day</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 10,247 mothers and significant female role models attended celebrations at more than 180 schools on the first annual Women’s Day• 547 home visits were made by parent liaisons• Over 3,000 individual interpreting assignments were fulfilled by interpreters in up to 60 languages
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The staff at WES was aware of the importance of participation numbers. Mr. Johnson explained that he is responsible for reporting participation numbers to the district on a monthly basis. When asked how the school measures the effectiveness of parent involvement activities, Ms. Taylor said the school reviews “the amount of turnouts that we have. We have [parents] sign in and things like that. [We] check the visitors’ sign-in book...especially [at times] that we have programs and things. They have to sign in and how many people come and that kind of thing.”

Although Mr. Johnson submitted parent attendance numbers to the SPS central office on a monthly basis, these data played a smaller role in how staff evaluated WES’ parent involvement activities. When staff did refer to numbers, they offered relatively low expectations for what could be evaluated as a success. For instance, when Ms. Jackson, one of the primary teachers, described a recent fundraiser as successful, Ms. Jarrett replied, "I think what I remember is that they had like 12 students to turn in fundraiser packets total [for] the whole

school." While surprised, Ms. Taylor still felt that the fundraiser was successful. In another instance, Ms. Taylor described an annual curriculum event held at the school. "We have a [state test] annual thing. We do it on a Saturday. We have a big turnout...we had like 10 parents from each grade level ...but you're talking 400 kids, 300 kids. Ten is not really [a large number]. You get 10 percent of [the school student population]. To us that's a big turnout," she explained. Mr. Johnson provided another example when he stated, "We've never really had a PTA, but we've had much parent involvement."

Staff also relied on the implementation status of activities to characterize the strength of parent involvement at the school. In other words, staff measured the effectiveness of the school's parent involvement policies, to some degree, by the structural components the school had in place, or the activities in which staff members engage. These activities were seen as successful because they were offered, even if participation was low. For instance, Ms. Taylor, in describing the strength of the school's parent involvement initiatives, said, "We send a robocall... We have a sign outside. We send newsletters home." Mr. Stewart said, "We do send [benchmark testing] information to parents letting them know the results of the test." Neither Ms. Taylor nor Mr. Stewart saw a need to tie the success of these activities to the actual use by parents.

Because staff had a relatively low expectation for parent involvement, it may be that few saw a need to monitor or evaluate activities, at least not beyond the reporting required by the district. Many of the individuals that I interviewed seemed reconciled to low levels of parent involvement. Mr. Stewart, for example, observed that parents will get involved in the lower grades, but he did not expect parents to be involved in the upper grades.

We have some parents of children in the lower grades and a lot of parents will try to help out in the classroom. As the child matriculates to the upper grades, a lot of [students] don't want the parents around because [the students] want to be with their friends.

Ms. Jackson described how he had reconciled himself to fewer parent volunteers for field trips because of the increased security requirements.

And now they have to get fingerprinted and get background checks and some of them aren't going to do that so they just don't come in. We used to have parents that would come and go on field trips, but now the money's limited and they don't go on field trips anymore.

Mr. Stewart provided a similar understanding of parents support at home. In his mind, some parents will always be involved while others will not.

A lot of [parents] are willing to try to help out [at home]... You have some parents that are involved with their children the whole nine yards. Then you have some parents who, being truthful about it, I look at it as you just put your child here and you expect everybody else do the job of parenting except you... It's sort of a 50-50 thing. You have those that are always involved [and those that are not].

Yet another reason why few saw a need to monitor or evaluate activities may have been because there was no articulated plan or parent involvement goals. Although WES' school improvement plan discussed parent involvement, the goals were vague and not clearly

measurable. According to the plan, Wilson intended to increase parent involvement by increasing participation in the PTA; communicating with parents via phone, writing, and internet; conducting community outreach meetings; conducting parental information sessions; and participating in community bonding events. However, the plan provided no target participation rates beyond the vague reference of increasing parent participation.

Although the school improvement plan could be thought of as the most likely document to set forth explicit goals for parent involvement, few mentioned the school improvement plan when describing how WES parent involvement policies are developed, codified, and articulated. Only one set of teachers mentioned the school improvement plan: the primary teachers. When explaining how the school develops parent involvement priorities, Ms. Jackson said, “We have a school improvement plan, though I haven’t seen a copy of it yet, and I know for our school improvement plan there is a component for parent involvement.” As the other primary teachers nodded in agreement, Ms. Jarrett asked, “What goes into the school improvement plan?”

Overall, there was little evidence that WES had a clear parent involvement plan that included target goals, monitoring, and evaluation. Staff complied with the district’s mandates, but had no clear goals that might be the basis for evaluation and improvement. When asked how school staff develop and communicates its parent involvement priorities to parents, Ms. Toliver replied, “I’m not really sure there is a total consensus on those things as being priorities.” Ms. Duncan said, “I don’t know if our priority is there, if that’s a top priority at this school.” Ms. Jarrett added, “I don’t see it to be a priority and I’m newer to the school. I don’t see it to be a priority at all.” Although staff said that they valued parent involvement, they did not value it enough to make it a priority in the school’s efforts for improvement.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The information presented in this study indicates that while parent involvement in schools has gotten attention from federal, state, and local policy makers, it remains an elusive goal in some schools. The purpose of this study was to consider stakeholder perceptions, particularly school staff, about the formulation, prioritization, implementation, and evaluation of parent involvement goals, strategies, and activities. This dissertation narrowed in on a singular case within the multifaceted ecosystem of school parent involvement, with a particular focus on the following questions:

1. How does the staff of a low-income school form parent involvement priorities, policies, and programs? To what extent do policies such as Title I, Race to the Top, and No Child Left Behind influence the formation of parent involvement priorities, policies, and programs?
2. What types of parent involvement does the staff consider to be most important and why does it consider some forms of parent involvement more important than others? Does the staff have a collective vision of parent involvement?
3. How does the staff of a low-income school go about promoting different forms of parent involvement? What types of parent involvement invitations do school staff make to parents?
4. Which types of parent involvement programs and practices does the staff deem effective? What factors does the staff consider when evaluating the effects of programs and practices?

The study's setting was Wilson Elementary School (WES), a 600-student building in Suburban County Public Schools (SCPS). WES is located in a suburb of a major Mid-Atlantic city. WES had a substantial population of minority students (99%), as well as a substantial population of students who received free and reduced price meal services (71%); however, the school lost its Title I status when the school district revised its guidelines related to Title I qualification.

In addition to reviewing relevant documents and observing a school-wide parent involvement activity, the database consists of interviews of parents, the principal, primary classroom teachers, intermediate classroom teachers, and a non-classroom special education resource teacher. The principal, one of the primary teachers, and one of the intermediate teachers were members of the school leadership team.

In this chapter, I summarize prominent themes that pertain to the research questions, with comparisons to relevant research in the existing literature. I also offer thoughts about potential implications for school practices and future research. Finally, I end the dissertation with a few concluding statements.

Findings

Analyses of documents, observations, and participant interviews yielded the following conclusions:

Question 1: How does the staff of a low-income school form parent involvement priorities, policies, and programs? To what extent do policies such as Title I, Race to the Top, and No Child Left Behind influence the formation of parent involvement priorities, policies, and programs?

Finding: SCPS dictated priorities and established structures pertaining to parent involvement. WES staff implemented formal structures to the letter of the policy, but showed little initiative beyond compliance. The influence of federal policies generally manifested in the form of foci on funding and standardized testing, though there was some evidence that the loss of Title I status diminished former parent involvement activities.

Parent involvement goals, policies, activities, and evaluations were codified by SCPS. Central office staff reportedly monitored the extent to which schools carried out activities that were in keeping with the stated goals. With respect to structured policies that were specific to WES, the principal reportedly monitored parent involvement activities to make sure the district's policies were implemented. Structured activities included the district vision statement, inclusion of parent involvement goals in the school improvement plan, description of mandatory activities and an online portal for the retrieval of information about schools.

Although structured activities included support for PTAs and curriculum events, there was no evidence from school documents, observations, or interviews that anyone other than school district employees helped to determine any parent involvement goals or activities. School staff referred to the school improvement plan as providing a parent involvement plan, but no one seemed to know precisely what was in the plan or how the plan was developed. This lack of diverse input contributes to what Lawson (2003) described as "school-centric" involvement policies and practices. Lawson found that school staff became less community-focused and required parents to become more school-centric. Several scholars have opined that in order to get parents, students, and other community stakeholders more involved in schools, school staff must employ strategies that are rooted in their respective communities (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Hirota & Jacobs, 2003; Kay, 2002; Mediratta, Fruchter & Lewis, 2002; Shutz). It is unlikely that

parent involvement strategies will reflect insights of the all stakeholders if parents are without seats at the policy development table.

Federal policies appeared to prompt the development of parent involvement policies at the district level, but had little direct influence on the policies at the school level. The loss of Title I status at WES resulted in a loss of resources, according to staff. These resources included a parent liaison position and other staff who assisted with coordinating and implementing parent involvement activities in the past. There was little evidence that these responsibilities were delegated to others or institutionalized; and, as a result, there was less clarity among staff about the scheduling of parent involvement activities or the success of the activities that were implemented. When the Title I funding was withdrawn, staff did not take actions to ensure that Title I supported parent involvement events were continued.

The other observed influence of federal policy was the possible tension between parents and staff over testing requirements and accountability. WES was under pressure to raise test scores and meet mandated performance levels for students. Staff wanted parents to be supportive of the instructional and curricular programs at the school by supporting learning at home and making certain that students arrive on time ready to take mandated assessments. As Ms. King stated in her interview, “Parents need to understand that testing is serious business.” The principal, Mr. Johnson, complained about the school choice provision included in No Child Left Behind. In his mind, the provision encouraged parents of poor performing students to transfer their children to other schools, creating testing liabilities for the receiving schools. Although he provided no evidence for his claim, his statement underscored how accountability measures could undermine parent-staff relations, particularly in schools under pressure to meet testing goals.

Question 2: What types of parent involvement does the staff consider to be most important and why does it consider some forms of parent involvement more important than others?

Does the staff have a collective vision of parent involvement?

Finding 2: Wilson Elementary School staff supplemented SCPS policies with unstructured activities that aligned with staff considerations of importance. These policies placed much of the responsibility for initiating parent involvement on the parents themselves. Other than the district mandated activities and a shared belief that parents needed to take advantage of the opportunities provided to them by staff, there was no clear collective vision of parent involvement at WES.

In addition to the structured policies imposed by the central office and principal, the staff at WES implemented unstructured activities in an ostensible effort to enhance parent involvement at home and school. These activities included direct communications between teachers and parents, social networking of parents, and the school's purported open door policy. Unstructured activities appeared to be loosely based on district's vision and goals for parent involvement, as well as to be a reflection of traditions and staff beliefs about parent involvement. However, most of these unstructured initiatives were loosely stated and monitored, if at all, by either the district central office or school-based staff. Furthermore, it seems that the top-down imposition of priorities and policies led to staff following the letter of the law, rather than the intent of district policies.

All of the teachers appeared to go along with parent involvement mandates such as staying after school for an extra 30 minutes (a structured initiative); however, there was little evidence that just being available during this time was an effective means to get parents

involved. Individual teachers attempted other methods, such as social networking using Face Book like software, to involve parents; other teachers mentioned the effectiveness of calling parents so as to establish a personal relationship. Still, no one reported regularly making proactive verbal contact with parents. More often teachers felt rebuffed by what they felt was a lack of cooperation from parents, or reticent about what they felt was a lack of initiative by parents to reach out to them. As Mr. Stewart stated,

For some children, I haven't met the parents one time all year; and here we go it's in the third quarter. It's unfortunate, but it's reality. With some parents, the only time you hear from them is if something happens with the child or the child gets in trouble.

The absence of a strong vision for parent involvement at WES is due in part to the absence of proactive vision on the part of WES' staff. DiPoala and Tschannen-Moran (2005) would describe staff at WES as "tolerating" rather than "soliciting" parent involvement. If staff met consistently to discuss parent involvement, maybe policies and priorities that were specific to WES would develop organically and engender greater buy-in from community stakeholders. To a large extent, staff at WES delegated responsibility for developing a vision for the school to the district. They complied with the policies but did not demonstrate strong buy in or the belief that parent involvement could be a positive force at the school. More often staff expressed low expectations for parent involvement at the school. In many ways, the staff at WES were reconciled to what they believed was parent disinterest in participating in the school's academic mission. "Parent involvement [opportunities are] available," according to Mr. Johnson, "but we as a school don't look at it as a crutch, because we say, 'We need to do, whether the parents do or not.'"

Question 3: How does the staff of a low-income school go about promoting different forms of parent involvement? What types of parent involvement invitations do school staff make to parents?

Finding 3: Despite structured and unstructured activities, WES' parents were involved at a low rate in the school. Communications and invitations to participate were largely one way, such as the robocalls. Staff nostalgia, expectation about parent initiative, and perceived lack of agency might have contributed to weak parent involvement outcomes at the school.

Abdul-Adil and Farmer, Jr. (2006) characterized the apathy of minority parents as an urban legend. The authors declared that African-American parents would be more involved if schools focused on outreach, empowering parents, and strengthening community resources, describing how such activities in some schools substantially increased the involvement of low-income minority parents. Abdul-Adil and Farmer, Jr. studied inner-city parents, but there is no reason to assume that similar activities would not prove equally effective with suburban minority parents. In WES' case, there were few outreach and training activities and even fewer attempts to build community resources. Thus, one cannot rule out that the low levels of participation at WES were due to the weakness of the school's parent involvement strategies.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) theorized that parents' involvement decisions were based primarily on three variables: 1) parental role construction, 2) parents' perceived life circumstances, and 3) involvement invitations made to parents. While this study did not provide much data from parents, it is instructive to consider staff perspectives about these constructs, and how these perspectives may have influenced parent involvement at the school. For example,

parental role construction, from the staff perspective, could be viewed as limited to supporting teachings, especially with regards to promoting learning at home and in school. Their construct of parent roles was driven largely by staff nostalgia, by their recollections of growing up and their own parents' interactions with them about schooling. When parents did not live up to the images – accurate or not – pressed into staff's memories, then some staff members wrote the parents off as apathetic.

Although staff expressed some sympathy for what they perceived to be the life circumstances of the parents of their students, they also expressed impatience with parents for not keeping in contact with teachers or not overcoming adversity. Ms. Jarrett complained, "We're in January. I told her I shouldn't have seen you for the first time yesterday. You should have been up here..." Staff saw parents as responsible for taking initiative to help their children learn, and when parents failed to do so they placed the blame on parents' shoulders. In WES staff had low expectations and a perceived lack of agency in terms of shaping parent involvement outcomes. Statements such as, "We can only do what we can do," encapsulated the viewpoint conveyed by participants at the administrative, primary, and intermediate school levels.

Most invitations to get involved were one-way, such as the robocalls, that left little opportunity for dialogue. Others invitations were "standing" or "implied," from the staff perspective. Although these forms of invitations are relatively weak motivators for parent involvement, staff and even the parents interviewed expressed an expectation of parent initiative or criticized the lack thereof. Ms. Jarrett said,

Our perspective is that realistically we want parents to at least get involved at home, if not be able to get here to school... You always get this backlash of these

excuses and you have to accommodate everybody's excuses...It's your job as a parent to be invested in your child's education...Why do I care about their reading more than you do?

The school's "open door policy," which the principal announced during Back to School Night, was, in many ways, the primary parent involvement strategy embraced by staff. There was little evidence of staff directly encouraging parents to be involved regularly, particularly within the school building. Nor was there evidence that staff collected data, beyond attendance sheets, to determine if parents were taking advantage of the open door policy. There was little impetus for staff to take greater initiative in fostering parent involvement or in changing their behavior in how they interacted with parents.

Question 4: Which types of parent involvement programs and practices does the staff deem effective? What factors does the staff consider when evaluating the effects of programs and practices?

Finding 4: Insufficient resources were dedicated to planning, monitoring, and analyzing parent involvement strategies at the school level. Overall, there was little evidence that WES had a clear parent involvement plan that included target goals, monitoring, and evaluation. Staff complied with the district's mandates, but had no clear local goals that might be the basis for evaluation and improvement.

WES did not have a clearly articulated plan upon which to build consensus about parent involvement. Although the school improvement plan had broad goals, the plan was not distributed to teachers or discussed at staff meetings. Moreover, the goals were somewhat abstract and not always clearly measurable. As stated earlier, there was little evidence of a

collective vision for parent involvement other than the district's goals and generally agreed upon low expectations for the parents of the students in the school. The major priority for parent involvement was to encourage support for teachers and encourage learning at home, in part because the school was under pressure by the district to increase assessment scores. To that end the staff sent home testing results to parents, include benchmark test results that purportedly assessed how prepared students were to take the state assessments. However, there was no evidence that staff actually monitored what parents did with this information or attempted to evaluate whether the reports actually facilitated more involvement in the home. Thus, there was little analysis of the effectiveness of parent involvement initiatives at the school.

Beothel's (2003) meta-analysis found that, among other issues, language barriers, cultural role construction, families' lack of knowledge, and discrimination impedes parental involvement. How did those variables affect parent involvement at WES? One can't know for sure, for the staff at WES did not systematically consider these possible impediments to involvement or any other. There was no in-depth analysis of WES parent involvement data or investigation into research-based best practices to address WES parent involvement needs. The staff employed parent involvement programs and practices out of tradition, even though parent involvement at WES was traditionally low. It is quite likely that there was so little effort to monitor and improve parent involvement at the school because parent involvement was such a low priority. When I asked how school staff develop and communicates its parent involvement priorities to parents, Ms. Toliver replied, "I'm not really sure there is a total consensus on those things as being priorities." Ms. Duncan concurred, "I don't know if our priority is there, if that's a top priority at this school."

Revisiting Theories

At the beginning of this dissertation, I outlined three theories that frame the significance and purpose of my study: Epstein's Overlapping Spheres, Epstein's Six Types of Family and Community Involvement, and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's parent involvement model (HDS). In addition to serving as an impetus for the study, the concepts embedded in these three theories were used to shape data collection instruments and facilitate the analysis and interpretation of results. These theories conveyed the rudiments of a conceptual framework at the heart of this study. I juxtaposed theories with my findings to reexamine their usefulness in studying school staff decision-making in a context of high stakes accountability.

Some scholars contend that involvement policies based on Epstein's theories are too broad, simplistic, and school-centered to account for the socioeconomic disparities and unbalanced power dynamics that accompany the diversity of school populations. From their perspective, low levels of participation should be expected because low-income parents lack the time and expertise to effectively partner with school staff, particularly around issues of achievement. In order to affect school improvement more effectively, critics argue that schools must partner with a broad array of community stakeholders—not just parents—to address the social and political inequities that exist among their stakeholders (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007; Mahwinney, 1998).

At WES, staff appeared to be somewhat disinterested in parent involvement. Staff disinterest might be an accurate reflection of the limitations of parent involvement in addressing the school's priority – namely, raising student achievement and avoiding sanctions. It might be that in an environment of high stakes accountability for student test scores Epstein's notion of community engagement would be more productive than a focus on individual forms of parent

involvement. Epstein's Six Types of Family and Community Involvement, therefore, might be reconsidered in light of the pressures placed on schools due to high-stakes accountability. Under these circumstances partnering with community, where resources are likely to be greater and more varied, may be more essential than pursuing partnerships with children's parents.

With respect to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's theory, the data collected in this study shed some light on how role construction, general self-efficacy, perceived life context, and the nature of school invitations affect how parents *and* school staff understand issues related to parent involvement. My findings suggest that the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model might be extended to consider the perceived self-efficacy, role construction, and knowledge and skills of staff. These constructs appear to be equally important in explaining the actions (or lack of actions) of staff regarding parent involvement. Extending these constructs to staff might provide a more balanced model and realistic assessment of the challenges posed by policies that seek to promote parent involvement in low-income and low-achieving schools.

Limitations

The primary limitations of this study are associated with the participation sample and potential researcher bias. The limitations are not unusual for a study of this nature, but nevertheless deserve attention.

As is the circumstance with many case studies, this dissertation used a small sample size (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Therefore, the results of this study might not transfer to other contexts. However, generalization to other populations was not the main goal of this investigation. Rather, one rationale for this study was to add to the empirical literature about parent involvement in schools and better understand the nature of

parent involvement in an low-income, predominantly minority school. The findings of this study add to a body of knowledge that will allow the development of long-term, defensible theories and supports to aid the decision-making of school stakeholders regarding parent involvement.

The self-selected nature of the participants also limited the data set and conclusions of the study. Although I went door-to-door on more than four occasions to solicit participants, only a handful of staff agreed to participate in interviews. Even more limiting is the number of parents that were willing to lend their voices to the study. Those individuals who agreed to participate in the study produced fruitful conversations, but the viewpoints of parents and staff who chose not to be involved were not considered beyond the hearsay of their peers. Broader-based methodologies such as surveys might be better suited to consider the perspectives of a wider range of stakeholders, though doing so might limit the depth of data that could be obtained. This investigation, on the other hand, produced a number of participant anecdotes that aligned in a way that allowed themes to emerge during data analysis.

I was the only researcher to take part in this study, so the dissertation will likely be affected by some researcher bias. As stated in chapter three, observer effects and data selection affect the trustworthiness of most studies, quantitative or qualitative. To offset the potential researcher bias, I established clear criteria for data collection and analysis, such as interview protocols. I also triangulated data, used discriminant sampling, debriefed with peers, and tried to place my analysis within the context of relevant literature.

Implications for Practice

When investigating the possible causes of airplane accidents, Degani and Wiener (1994) concluded that four variables played primary roles in airplane incidents: the philosophy of an

airline's management, the policies, derived from the philosophy, the procedures created to implement the policies, and the practices employed by frontline staff. The researchers nicknamed the variables the Four Ps.

The implications for WES, and schools in similar circumstances, center on similar Four Ps: priorities, policies, programs, and practices. In WES' case, priorities were set by the school district's central office. SCPS also established some of the policies and programs, which WES combined with, to a lesser extent, school-developed policies and programs. Practices were employed out of tradition and the desire to at least follow the letter of school and district policies. For instance, the school created programs such as a family board game night; but teachers were not mandated to attend and few came to the event. Nonetheless, the event did occur. Back to School Night was a mandatory event for teachers, and there were few, if any, unexcused staff absences.

Some studies have pointed out the significant influence of district officers and principals on school-site policies and practices, especially if school leaders demonstrate commitment to a policy and provide sufficient resources to achieve goals (Malen & Ogawa, 1988; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Top-down procedure certainly played out at WES, though leadership support was weak and few additional resources were provided to augment parent involvement programs. Others have argued that in order to improve parent involvement, representatives from all stakeholder groups should participate in the ongoing development, implementation, and evaluation of the school's programs, priorities, policies, and practices regarding parent involvement (Lawson, 2003). To accomplish such a goal, certainly school leaders will have to make it clear that parent involvement is a priority not just in SCPS but also in WES. Without leadership and the resources required to develop workable programs, parent involvement in WES

is unlikely to improve. Assuming parent involvement could become a priority at WES, school leaders might consider the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Data collection, analysis, and goal setting. WES' leaders should treat parent involvement goals the way they treat school reading and math goals. School staff should meet regularly to assess and strategize about ways to reduce barriers to parent involvement and increase the likelihood of stakeholder buy-in. There should be grade-level and teacher-level goals and strategies. The team—which should include staff, parents, and community members—could strategize for upwards of 35 parent involvement types, such as the kinds of involvement analyzed by Fan (2001). Staff could focus on two types of involvement, such as Gaetano's (2007) formal and informal parent involvement. Perhaps a research-based middle ground would be Epstein's (1995) Six Types of Family and Community Involvement described in chapter two. Moreover, Epstein et al. (2002) wrote a textbook that provided guides for planning, implementing, and evaluating parent involvement practices in schools. WES and schools in similar circumstances do not have to reinvent the wheel, assuming parent involvement is a priority for them.

WES' staff should collect and analyze available data, such as parent surveys, event attendance data, and anecdotal stories from stakeholder focus groups. Perhaps additional data would be helpful as well. For instance, Anderson and Minke (2007) and Deslandes and Bertand (2005) surveyed parents and found that school invitations for involvement were related to parent involvement behaviors. Perhaps the staff at WES could use similar results from their own parent survey. In other cases, parents portrayed their schools as uninviting, tense and formal (Halsey, 2005; Quioco & Daoud, 2006). It would be helpful for WES staff to know if their stakeholders

harbor comparable feelings; such data could provide useful opportunities for making parents feel more welcomed and encouraged to participate in school.

This is not meant to advocate that schools view parent involvement solely as an automated, robotic phenomenon (i.e., through the systematic analysis of data). Human interactions involve emotions, misunderstandings, lacks of clarity, unequal power relationships, and other issues that could sidetrack parent involvement strategies. Using data to create opportunities for discussion between stakeholders can be a useful way of strengthening interactions between staff and parents. Parent liaisons, such as the one that was supported through Title I funding at WES, can also facilitate discussions and mutual understandings. If the school district does not have a qualified facilitator for parent involvement strategy meetings, then WES could look to bring in an outside contractor.

Recommendation 2: Invitations and personal relationship building. WES' staff did not attempt to build personal, invitational relationships with parents. The relationship paradigm appeared to be largely one way and occasionally transactional. In the latter case, each party exchanged information ostensibly to help the children they share to succeed, but they did not engage in extended discussion or strategy building. Staff left the doors open—teachers stayed before and after school, there were telephones in each room—but staff did not appear to invite parents in personally. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler as well as others have found invitations significantly impact parents' willingness to be involved in school (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Green et. al, 2007; Green & Hoover-Dempsey 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Overstreet, 2005; Van Voorhis, 2003; Walker, et. al. 2005). SCPS or the principal could mandate a certain number of personal invitations that teachers should provide to each parent. There is

ample evidence to support the effectiveness of increased staff outreach policies and practices to parents, and WES' students would likely benefit from such efforts.

Recommendation 3: Staff professional development. Overcoming the roles, or scripts, stakeholders assign to each other are the some of the greatest challenges of parent involvement (Bartley, 1986; Beothel, 2003; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Walker et al., 2005). In addition to scripts, Lawson's (2003) list of parent involvement barriers included communication, school-centric versus community-centric perspectives, lack of trust of schools, and teacher apathy. Many schools combat constraints by providing parent training opportunities and staff development courses (Chadwick, 2004; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Lawson, 2003). WES' stakeholders could benefit from such experiences.

As many have documented, staff development in the school building begins with the principal (Boethel, 2003; Sanders & Harvey, 2002); and principals need the support of central office staff (Kahan, Byrd, & Drew, 2008). Kahan, Byrd, and Drew (2008) documented how a school district in the state of Washington facilitated small, collaborative support groups comprised of principals and district supervisors. Group members supported each other by providing conceptual suggestions, logistical advice, and emotional support in regular meetings. This structure could be adapted to fit the parent involvement foci of SCPS or any school district.

By incorporating central office supervisors into the training of principals, if not also school staff, the sponsoring school district would send the message that schools must prioritize parent involvement. As things currently stand, many schools are presented with a parent involvement paradox: schools are responsible for parent involvement, but they are evaluated by student test scores. This circumstance might create disincentives for creating school foci on

parent involvement. As a result, district administrators and principals need to work together to clarify these objectives and identify reasonable expectations for parent involvement in often resource-strapped schools.

Additionally, if WES staff begins to devote more resources to planning, implementing, and evaluating parent involvement practices, staff might need training that cultivates their data collection and analysis skills. Some staff members said they individually collected and analyzed student data. Perhaps the person responsible for student data training could take on the task of parent data training. Data-based decision-making skills should be transferable.

Implications for Future Research

Data collected during this study yielded some anecdotal information about the impact of federal funding on parent involvement. Within the two school years prior to this study, SCPS changed the funds allocated to WES in a way that cost the school both its parent liaison and its Title I status. Staff and parents agreed that the parent liaison was instrumental in terms of outreach and relationship-building with community members. The loss of Title I funds reduced the number of events that WES was able to provide. For instance, WES used to conduct weekday tutoring nights and Saturday school sessions during the year. During the year of the study, those nights were phased out, and the academically-focused nights were reduced to a reading night and a math night. Future parent involvement research should more closely examine the parent-involvement-related influences of high stakes testing and other mandates by NCLB, RTT, Title I, and other policies that might disproportionately affect low-income schools.

Secondly, it would also be helpful for future researchers to delve deeper into the role of staff and student invitations on parent involvement. Several staff members alluded to invitations.

I asked Ms. Toliver what she thinks would make parents more likely to become involved. Her answer suggested that the strongest invitation is helping children be successful.

When they see their kid coming home being successful. When the kids buy into the education. And when the kids believe they can do. When kids go home excited about school and when kids go home excited about the work they can do in school. When kids are having good opportunities when they come to school. Do they go home and talk about those things? Parents want to come in and see what's going on because they like that... When you make school inviting and fun for children, and meaningful for children, and children are finding success every day, parents get involved.

There is some evidence to buttress Ms. Toliver's claim. The handful of studies that utilize the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model suggest that teacher and child invitations are key components of parent involvement (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). However, less is known about what types of invitations are most effective in terms of getting parents involved, and how particular types of invitations connect to particular types of parent involvement. Even less is known about the decisions of particular demographic segments, such as low-income parents of urban elementary school children, because research on parent involvement programs does not focus often on geographic subgroup data.

Also, the limited size and self-selected nature of the sample constrict the applications of this study's findings. To confirm, or refute, the conclusions stated here, examinations of the research questions at other low-income, suburban metropolitan schools are needed. Future investigations may apply qualitative methodologies that are similar to this dissertation. On the

other hand, perhaps a large-scale survey could be used to investigate whether the findings in this case are indicative of broader phenomena.

Concluding Statement

Most school stakeholders report that parent involvement, in some form, is essential to school success (National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, 2006; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007). Two primary questions become: (1) how should parents be involved; and (2) how can schools solicit the desired forms of parent involvement efficiently? This dissertation explored how the staff at one school attempted to answer those questions. The study presented an informed perspective of parent involvement considerations within a low-income elementary school context.

The literature reviewed in this investigation suggests that parent involvement is a multifaceted concept. Various stakeholders come to the table with perceptions and opinions that affect the relationships of families and schools. This dissertation does not compare the relative importance of parents or schools in the development of the children that sit at the boundary of their mutual responsibilities; such a debate is fruitless (Levin & Belfield, 2002). Through two-way invitation, dialogue, and open-mindedness, stakeholders can go beyond aphorisms, discover new information, and gain deeper understandings to form symbiotic coalitions focused on student development.

Ultimately, school stakeholders are faced with many issues that are beyond their control. The plight of many families and schools cannot be changed by simply revising curricula and increasing staff development. Real change calls for a long-term approach that aims to “change attitudes, cultures and educational philosophies” of a broader constituency that includes schools,

students, parents, and other community members (Zoch, 2004, p. 202). Whether schools aim to be agents of change or mechanisms that support the status quo remains to be seen. If K-12 educational institutions choose to assist in change, perhaps parent involvement can be one of the tools that help schools create the models that they hope society *writ large* will eventually become.

Many schools state the belief that all children can achieve high levels of learning. They assess students and provide differentiated instruction based upon demonstrated student needs. Some schools have the stated belief that all teachers can become master teachers. Leaders of such schools might develop plans for professional development not only for individual teachers, but the entire staff. What if WES staff stated the belief that all parents can be involved both inside and outside of the school building? What goals, strategies, activities, and assessments could be in place? What tools for diagnosis of, and prescription for, family circumstances could be developed and implemented? What differentiated methods could be implemented at the community, school, and individual family levels? Researchers and program practitioners have put forth plans based on the belief that all parents are involved at some level. For Wilson Elementary School and schools in similar circumstances, the knowledge base is adequate and growing. If schools make parent involvement a priority and follow through with policies, programs, and practices, then parent involvement will improve.

Appendix A: Protocols

Protocol: Parent Questioning

Interviews may take place in the school, a participant’s home, a local community center, or any place that the participant requests.

- 1) Interviewer greets participant.
- 2) Participant completes a sign-in sheet (which includes demographic information).
- 3) Interviewer asks questions.
- 4) Interviewer thanks the participant for his or her participation.

Research Questions

- 1) **How does the staff of a low-income school prioritize types of parent involvement?**
- 2) **How does the staff of a low-income school go about promoting different forms of parent involvement?**
- 3) **How do particular involvement invitations affect low-income parents’ choices of involvement?**

Purpose	Base Question/Statement	Probe/Follow-up Question(s)
Identify parent’s role construction	Tell me about how school was for you as a student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you feel about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Your teachers? - Your performance? - Overall school experience? • Were your parents involved in your education?
Identify parent’s role construction	In your opinion, how should parents be involved in their children’s educations?	
Identify factors that make parents more or less involved in particular ways	How are you (or have you been) involved in your child(ren)’s education?	
Identify how the school promotes different forms of parent involvement Identify which involvement types are promoted relatively more or less often	Tell me about your child(ren)’s school now.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you feel welcome?
Identify how involvement invitations affect parent’s choices of involvement Identify how the school promotes different forms	What are the school’s expectations of you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the school communicate those expectations? • In what ways does the school ask you to get

of parent involvement		involved?
Identify parent's role construction Identify the impact of parent's perceived life circumstances	In terms of involvement with your child(ren)'s education, What are your expectations of yourself?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In school? • Outside of school?
Identify factors that make parents more or less involved in particular ways	How often are you involved with these things?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What things are likely to make you more involved? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In school? - Outside of school? • What things are likely to make you less involved? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In school? - Outside of school? • Examples? • (Push for Six Types Info)
	Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to share?	

Protocol: Staff Questioning

Interviews may take place in the school, a participant's home, a local community center, or any place that the participant requests.

- 1) Interviewer greets participant.
- 2) Participant completes a sign-in sheet (which includes demographic information).
- 3) Interviewer asks questions.
- 4) Interviewer thanks the participant for his or her participation.

Research Questions

- 1) **How does the staff of a low-income school prioritize types of parent involvement?**
- 2) **How does the staff of a low-income school go about promoting different forms of parent involvement?**
- 3) **How do particular involvement invitations affect low-income parents' choices of involvement?**

Purpose	Base Question	Probe/Follow-up Question(s)
	Tell me about the parent involvement	

	at this school.	
Identify how the staff of the school prioritizes types of parent involvement	In your individual opinion, what are the most important ways parents should be involved with their children's educations?	- In school? - Outside of school?
Identify how the school promotes different forms of parent involvement		Does the school communicate those priorities to parents? How so?
Identify which involvement types are promoted relatively more or less often		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In what ways does the school ask parents to get involved?
Identify how the staff of the school prioritizes types of parent involvement	As a school staff, what are the most important ways parents should be involved with their children's educations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How were those priorities developed? Does the school communicate those priorities to parents? How so?
Identify how the school promotes different forms of parent involvement		
Identify which involvement types are promoted relatively more or less often		
Identify the impact of parent's role construction, perceived life circumstances, self-efficacy, and invitations on parent's involvement choices	In your opinion, what are parents' expectations of themselves?	- In school? - Outside of school?
Identify which involvement types are promoted relatively more or less often	What things are likely to make parents more involved?	- In school? - Outside of school?
Identify which involvement types are promoted relatively more or less often	What things are likely to make parents less involved?	- In school? - Outside of school?

	Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to share?	
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Questions are based in part on the *Parent Involvement Project Parent Questionnaire: Study 4* from The Family-School Partnership Lab. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (Green et al., 2007) used the survey to test their parent involvement decision-making model.

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