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An Examination of Volunteerism: Teacher Expectations and Parent Involvement

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

by

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December 2008

Dr. Eric Glover, Chair

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Keywords: Parent Involvement, *No Child Left Behind Act*, Parent Volunteerism

ABSTRACT

An Examination of Volunteerism: Teacher Expectations and Parent Involvement

by

Kenneth Carleton Lyon

The intent of this qualitative research was to learn from teachers and parents: to hear from teachers what they truly needed in the school with regard to parent involvement and to hear from parents the ways in which schools could extend a more effective welcome and the types of activities in which they were most willing to participate.

This qualitative study was conducted using interviews of parents and teachers from Title I elementary schools. The parents were interviewed to gain their perceptions of parent involvement and how effectively the school communicates parent involvement needs. Teachers were interviewed to determine their perceptions of parent involvement and what types of involvement they would prefer from parents.

During data analysis, several themes emerged forming constructs for the researcher's organizational framework. The following constructs: (a) culture, (b) perception, (c) communication, (d) insight, (e) appreciation, (f) commitment, (g) motivations, (h) opportunity, (i) dedication, (j) the greater good, and (k) education served as a basis for the ordering of data findings developing recommendations.

Based on the research the following conclusions were presented. Most teachers and parent volunteers greatly valued and wanted to work for the betterment of both the individual student and the school and desired an increase in parent volunteer experiences and contributions. Teachers wanted to be respected and recognized as true professionals and parent volunteers wanted to be respected and recognized as caring parents and integral players in school and student success.

Recommendations from study findings may help teachers and school leaders build more effective and productive relationships with parents by strengthening the home-school connection and contributing to increased student success. In addition, parent volunteers may also gain a better understanding of teacher needs and expectations that could further strengthen home-school relations.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my wife and best friend, Sanja. Without your constant encouragement and support, I never could have completed this process. Your love has helped me over every bump. Thank you for continuing to stand by my side day by day.

I wish to dedicate this to my wonderful children, Jake and Lucy. You have patiently waited on me to look up “one more reference”, or write “one more page”, and you have reminded me that life is to be enjoyed and occasional breaks are “OK”. I hope by watching me complete this you have learned the importance of tenacity and patience.

To my parents, Ken and Donna Lyon, I dedicate this study. From an early age, you impressed upon me the importance of education and hard work. Without the foundation laid by you early in my life, I never could have started this task.

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I would like to thank Dr. Nancy Dishner, who originally chaired my committee and retired midway through my process, for continually inspiring me due to her unfailing authenticity as an educational leader.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Federal legislation, specifically the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), mandated that schools find and address ways to encourage parental engagement with their child(ren)'s education. One aspect of this legislation included language directing schools to offer a more welcoming atmosphere to parents through multiple opportunities for parents to become involved in the culture of the school. NCLB (2002) specifically stated:

Each school must have a written policy which:

- (1) describe[s] the school's responsibility to provide high-quality curriculum and instruction in a supportive and effective learning environment that enables the children served under this part to meet the State's student academic achievement standards, and the ways in which each parent will be responsible for supporting their children's learning, such as monitoring attendance, homework completion, and television watching; volunteering in their child's classroom; and participating, as appropriate, in decisions relating to the education of their children and positive use of extracurricular time; and . . .
- (2) address the importance of communication between teachers and parents on an ongoing basis through, at a minimum
 - (A) parent-teacher conferences in elementary schools, at least annually, during which the compact shall be discussed as the compact relates to the individual child's achievement;
 - (B) frequent reports to parents on their children's progress; and

(C) reasonable access to staff, opportunities to volunteer and participate in their child's class, and observation of classroom activities. (n.p.)

There might be a strong positive correlation between student success and the extent to which that student's parents are involved in their child's education. Several studies indicated positive academic achievement among students who had involved parents (Coleman & Hoffer, 1993; Epstein, 2001; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Henderson & Berla, 1997; Rumberger et al., 1990; Swap, 1993; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1966; Whitaker & Fiore, 2001). In fact, family involvement appeared to be a greater predictor of student achievement than socioeconomic status (Henderson & Berla).

According to research, when schools apply certain parent involvement strategies such as providing home strategies to parents for way to support student learning, parents not only incorporate those practices but often respond more favorably to teachers and develop a growing sense of confidence in their role (Epstein, 2001). Some benefits of strong family involvement were higher graduation rates, better attendance, higher test scores, and positive attitudes (Greenwood, & Hickman, 1991). Research was indicative of the apparent positive impact of parent involvement on the school community and culture and on parents. Schools with higher parental involvement performed better than schools with less parent involvement (Epstein, 1987; Henderson, 1988). Parents had better attitudes about schooling and tended to find more educational opportunities when they were more involved in their child(ren)'s schooling (Henderson, 1988). Chavkin and Williams (1988) found that academic achievement was not the only student benefit of strong parent ties to the school. Student attendance increased, dropouts decreased, student motivation increased, and student self-esteem increased.

Historically, teachers held a dominant role over parents that was rarely questioned. Teachers in Puritan America apparently distrusted the ability of parents to control their own children and laws of that time allowed schools the right to remove students from delinquent parents. Delinquent care in that period was defined as parents neglecting the moral and literate growth of their children. (Tyack, 1966). In the 1800s, teachers often warned immigrant children not to copy the language and customs of their parents. This further divided the home and school. During the Industrial Revolution, uniformity was stressed because of the “weakening moral influence of both the nuclear and extended family” (Tyack, 1966, p.317).

Many teachers continue to hold parents solely responsible for the poor behavior and poor academic performance of their children. Many educators share biases against the home lives of their students, casting blame for social or school failure on a lack of parental effort. There was an underlying assumption that minority parents and economically disadvantaged parents, in particular, did not support their children’s educational progress (Ascher, 1988).

Other aspects of school culture separate school from home. Some teachers contend they must have administrative permission to collaborate with parents. Thus, much of the decision-making for the school and school system is conducted without parent input. School mandated parent-teacher conferences are held at the school, which can prove intimidating to many parents. (Henry, 1996)

Educators are becoming more vocal about their enthusiasm for parent engagement. Most teachers are not pleased with the withering existence of parent involvement and parents’ lack of interest in school matters (Linek, Rasinki, & Harkins, 1997). Family engagement was a major component of No Child Left Behind legislation and the one part of the law with which typical

opponents agreed. Under this section of the law, schools and districts must show they are attempting to and succeeding at involving parents in the educational process. There are times, however, when parents are unaware of the extent or type of involvement needed. Sometimes, they do not even feel welcome in the schools. As a corollary view, teachers often find the involvement of some parents to be intrusive or even disruptive to the educational process. It is a gap that begs for bridging. Hormuth (2005) found one barrier to parent involvement to be a lack of agreement between parents and teachers about what embodies involvement.

Is it possible to communicate clearly the offer of ample, appropriate and effective means of parent involvement? What level of and venues for parent involvement can be balanced and implemented to help ensure school success and achievement?

Statement of the Problem

According to the NCLB (2001), schools were to provide more opportunities for parent involvement in schools. Research suggested that this was not being enforced by the federal government nor addressed by the local districts (Davis, 2004). The purpose of this study was to examine the amount and types of involvement teachers desired from parents; to discover the types of involvement that school personnel found intrusive or inappropriate; to determine the types of involvement that interested parents; and to discern ways schools could more effectively communicate with, invite, and welcome parents and their involvement in the educational process and workings of the public school setting.

Research Questions

To examine the potential differences in the manner parents and teachers used to view the role of parents in schools, the following research questions were posed:

Question 1: What types of parent involvement occur in schools?

Question 2: What are specific types of parent involvement teachers prefer?

Question 3: Are there specific types of parent involvement that teachers deem intrusive or inappropriate?

Question 4: What types of involvement do parents prefer?

Question 5: What types of school involvement do parents find distasteful?

Question 6: How do teachers communicate parent involvement needs?

Question 7: How aware are parents of opportunities for involvement?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the knowledge base regarding parent and family involvement in schools. The study may also open dialogue between parents and teachers, allowing each group to identify and verbalize needs. The resulting benefits may be a better understanding of parent needs by the school and, therefore, lead to a more solid educational program for all students. Schools may be able more effectively to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind Legislation. The impact on schools may be improved communication between parents and teachers and more effective volunteerism and governance by parents in their schools.

Scope of the Study

This study addressed the six research questions mentioned above through qualitative methodology in which parents and teachers were interviewed. Parents were interviewed in focus groups using the Interview Guide for Parents (Appendix A) and teachers were interviewed one-on-one using the Interview Guide for Teachers (Appendix B). The purpose of the interviews was to gather perceptions and viewpoints regarding parent volunteerism and governance in schools. The personal and focus group interview were the primary methods of data collection. An emergent design process permitted the course of the interview to flow according to the thoughts of the participants and to grant them the time and opportunity to express their opinions. The interviewer maintained the overall focus of the questioning. The researcher maintained objectivity throughout the study and reflected regularly to ensure this position.

Statement of Research Bias and Limitations

As a teacher and a parent, I had a number of potential biases. I have worked in public schools for 15 years and experienced positive, negative, and nonexistent involvement from the parents of my students. I was instructed by parents on how to deliver my lessons and also on what lessons I should teach. I have had the great pleasure of welcoming parents to the classroom as visitors, guest speakers, tutors, and educational assistants. I was also thoroughly frustrated, exhausted, disappointed, and devastated by parents with whom I could not make any contact and who did not seem to have any interest in their child or their child's education. As a social creature in a school, I have heard the stories from other teachers of parent involvement in school. Unfortunately, many of the comments from fellow educators were negative regarding parents and their involvement.

I am also a parent. At times, I felt like an alien and unwanted pest in my children's school. I sat uncomfortably in conferences where I felt powerless, listening to the berating tone of a teacher who belittled my skills as a young, inexperienced, and under-resourced parent lacking the confidence to respond. I had warm and wonderful invitations to participate as a volunteer or chaperone on many different occasions from cooking for Kindergarteners to bus trips with the high school band. I worked to elbow my way into a class party or field trip planned by the moms who always signed up first for homeroom mother duty and were last to call on the families with one or no parent, very little to no resources or two parents who work outside the home full-time even when they checked multiple areas on PTA volunteer forms and dutifully and punctually turned them in year after year. I heard stories from other teachers about students' home life and the parents who live there. I heard stories from other parents about student school life and the teachers who worked there. And though there were lots of great things going on in schools and homes all around me, the stories tended to be much more negative than positive.

I was influenced by my own parents' school involvement. My father was a PTA president and both of my parents, who never pursued schooling beyond high school, were great supporters of public schools and the teachers who served them. In fact, it seemed, at times, that my parents "sided" with a teacher regardless of the issue.

Fortunately, I learned much from varied experiences with diverse populations and parents over the last decade. Early in my teaching career, when I was questioning the parenting of one of my students, a veteran teacher at my school said to me, "That parent doesn't love her child any more or less than you do. She just has never been equipped to help her child. That is part of your job." That direction from a voice of experience helped make me aware of the importance of

helping parents understand how they can be involved in the school setting and how they can best help their children succeed.

One final bias is that my wife is highly involved in our school system's family engagement efforts, thus, I hear often about the successes and failures of these programs. The results of this study will only be generalized to the schools involved in the study.

Though this research involves Title I schools, the parents interviewed are not necessarily from under-resourced households.

Definition of Terms

Following are the typologies of family involvement in schools as defined by Epstein and Salinas (1993):

Basic Obligations of Families (Type 1) refers to the responsibilities of families to provide a positive home environment conducive to learning.

Communications from the School (Type 2) refers to the responsibilities of schools to communicate in an appropriate manner with the home.

Volunteerism (Type 3) refers to those who assist teachers, administrators, and children in classrooms, parent rooms, or other areas of the school.

Learning Activities at Home and Connections to Curriculum (Type 4) refers to ideas that bring learning activities into the home that are related to material being taught in the classroom.

Decision Making, Committees, Advocacy, and Other Leadership Roles or Governance (Type 5) refers to parent participation in PTA, advisory councils, other committees or groups at the school.

Collaboration and Exchange with Community Organizations (Type 6) refers to school programs that coordinate student and family access to community and support services.

Overview of the Study

This chapter established the basis and need for the completion of this study. Chapter 2 includes a review of related literature and findings of parental involvement in schools. Chapter 3 consists of the methodologies and procedures used to gather data, including discussion of the population, the procedures used, and methods of data analysis. Chapter 4 contains the data collection and findings, and Chapter 5 provides the conclusions and summary of the study and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This chapter is a review of pertinent literature and reports of research studies involving parent involvement in schools. The concepts and theories pertaining to parent involvement are defined; a history of parent involvement and important issues regarding this topic, such as NCLB and its affect on parent involvement, are discussed; and theories of parent involvement and the different ways parents and teachers view parent involvement are explored.

Defining Parent Involvement in Schools

Carefully defining parent involvement in school was necessary for identifying the factors that influenced it (Epstein, 1992; Keith, 1991). However, developing a clear definition of such a concept was not easy. Parent involvement covered a broad range of activities ranging from discussion with children about homework to attendance at Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings. In a review of the literature, Dimock, O'Donoghue, and Robb (1996) identified five basic categories of parent involvement: (a) school choice, (b) decision-making through formal structures or site-based councils, (c) teaching and learning, (d) effect on the physical and material environment and (e) communication.

The first category, school choice, referred to parents selecting educational institutions and experiences for their children. Although school choice was not a widespread practice, this movement seemed to be gaining momentum (Murphy, 1990). In the second type of parent involvement, decision-making through formal structures, parents sat on school councils or

governance groups where they were expected to take part in the collaborative administration of the school. This mode of involvement typically resulted from school restructuring efforts that devolved decision-making authority from the central office to individual schools.

The third category, involvement in teaching and learning, indicated parent involvement in the classroom (when parents volunteer), out of the classroom (when parents converse with teachers), and at home (when parents help with homework and discuss school-related issues). The fourth category, effect on the physical and material environment, concerned efforts by parents to ensure a safe and comfortable school environment for their children. Finally, Dimock, et al. (1996) discussed parents' role in communicating between home and school. It was suggested that in this category, parents played an important role when they contacted the school and when they received communication relating to student progress, school rules, student behavior, and so forth.

Epstein (1987) developed six basic types of parent involvement.

Type one: Basic Obligations of Families helped families with parenting skills and assisting schools in understanding families. Davies (1998) cites one challenge of this type of involvement was making educational materials available to all families.

Type two: Basic Obligations of Schools conducted effective communication about school programs and student progress from school-to-home and vice versa.

Type three: Involvement at School included organizing volunteers and supporting the school and students. Volunteer support could consist of parents or community members. Steinberg (1996) stated that there was a significant correlation between achievement and parent involvement in a student's extracurricular activities and attendance at the school.

Type four: Involvement in Learning Activities at Home related to learning at home, which meant involving families with their children on homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions. According to Epstein (1995), this was the most difficult to implement because of the variety of connections required: parent-school and student-school.

Type five: Involvement in Decision-Making, Governance, and Advocacy included families and community partners as participants in school decisions and developed parent leaders and representatives. This allowed the parent to have ownership of school policies

Type six: Collaboration and Exchange with Community Organizations covered coordinating resources and services from the community for families and students and the school, in turn, providing services to the community (Epstein, & Connors, 1992).

History of Parent Involvement

As far back as recorded history, parents were the nurturers of, modelers for, and educators of their children. Formal education outside the home was first recorded in Egypt's middle kingdom, 3787-1580 BCE and Greek culture considered children as the future (Berger, 1991). According to Plato:

And shall we just carelessly allow children to hear any casual tales which may be devised by casual persons, and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we shall wish them to have when they are grown up? We cannot. (1953, p. 221)

By the Middle Ages, the church facilitated formal education. Basic skills were taught by parents, but children by the age of 7 were taught to participate as little adults. (Handel, 1988).

In the 17th century, John Locke's writings replayed the idea of *tabula rasa* originated by Aristotle; e. g., that the infant's mind was a blank slate and it was the purpose of society to fill in the mind. Locke believed that if one were unable to parent effectively, the child should be removed from the parents for formal training (Berger, 1991).

In the United States, in the 19th century, the first parenting classes were offered in Portland, Maine in 1815. Calvinist doctrine assumed children were evil from within and this had to be removed or managed through parental discipline (Brim, 1965).

On the other hand, Rousseau theorized that children should be allowed to develop naturally. Education should follow a child's natural growth and it was the mother's job to nurture the child, introducing him or her to the outside world little by little. Based on this theory, Froebel came to the United States from Germany and opened the first kindergartens in the 1840s (Miller, 2006). Though these kindergartens were used mainly by middle class Americans, they became an avenue for bringing poorer families into the mainstream and educating those parents about child rearing (Weber, 1967).

The 19th century also featured the formation of several women's groups. Although these groups were initially a way for women to be heard in political matters, some groups eventually became parent support groups. One that remained an active force was the PTA, originally formed as Congress of Parents and Teachers in 1897 (Royshner, 2003).

The 20th century created at least three major changes for parental involvement. First, research indicated the need for early childhood education, which gave birth to Head Start. Second, there arose a change in the view of cultural diversity. There started to be more acceptance of diverse learners and families instead of the previous exclusion or segregation of said families. And, third, society began to emphasize support programs for the entire family.

Federally funded programs such as Parent Child Development Centers, Title I Parent Councils, Follow Thru Programs, and Individualized Education Programs were implemented (Olmstead, 1991).

Enhanced student performance, increased school competency and improved attitudes toward school were observed through the research surrounding these programs. (Berruta-Clement, Epstein, & Weikart, 1984; Olmstead, 1991). The 1990s and early 21st century increased the push for parent-school involvement to an unprecedented level with programs encouraging overlapping of duties and responsibilities between the school and home.

Since the early 1960s, middle-class parents were an effective influence through Parent Teacher Associations and informal access to the school administration (Havighurst, 1979). The local community control movement of the 1960s was manifested by racial and ethnic groups demanding a greater influence on the school curriculum (Crowson, 1992). As Coleman (1985) described, "public schools have become increasingly distant from the families of the children they serve, increasingly impersonal agents of a larger society" (p. 26). They lost their capacity to support and sustain families in their task of raising children. Increasingly, Coleman (1987) argued, parents with higher education backgrounds were more likely to find problems in the schools and to criticize teachers.

The need for and request of parent involvement in schools was not new. Sarason (1971) and Lightfoot (1978) suggested that, because district administration held such strong influence over school decision making, parents should get more involved in governance in the school. The school reform movement of the 1980s, brought on by a decline in student scores, caused decision making to be moved from the central office to the school site (Murphy, 1990). School administrators were required to share power with existing school councils made up primarily of

parents. In some districts these councils helped develop school improvement plans, while other councils were merely advisory.

Reforms, though, were not necessarily linked to increased student scores and achievement (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988; Malen & Ogawa, 1988). One study indicated that site-based management was not an effective indicator of increased test scores, despite the parent involvement component (Bell, 1996). The democratic nature of the United States might outweigh the desire to increase test scores through parent involvement. Parent involvement in decision-making might prompt schools toward more democratic practices (Brandt, 1989).

Epstein (1995) defined overlapping spheres of influence as the interactions between home, school, and community and described how these interactions affected the development of children. This concept was portrayed in daily interactions between teachers, students and parents. The theory assumed that through the purposeful connections between the home, school, and community students would become more successful. Examples demonstrating repetitive messages about the importance of school linked the three areas: Students sometimes forgot they were talking to their teacher and called her *Mom*; parents might offer tutoring at the coffee table instead of nightly television to help a student succeed in a particular subject area; or a child might raise his or her hand to speak at family dinner.

Theories Regarding Parental Involvement

The research indicated three factors that influenced parent involvement. 1) Expectation – parents who did not believe involvement was expected tended to be less involved than parents who saw it as appropriate; 2) Student educational progress – If parents believed their involvement could positively affect their children’s educational progress, they were more likely

to be involved; and 3) If the child wanted the parent to be involved, the parent was more likely to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1997).

“Supportive, empowered parents make a teacher’s work easier, not harder. When parents view the school’s climate as inviting, they become good public relations advocates for that school” (Botrie, & Wenger, 1992, p. 9). Educators and administrators must realize that parents and teachers need each other’s support more than ever. Reductions in school budgets brought on more difficult working conditions as teachers had less income and more difficulty accessing resources (Swap, 1987). Optimal parental involvement helps teachers continue to stretch limited resources and maximize student contact and further successes in learning. Parent involvement also strengthens ties to the community and increases community support and response as well as improving and maintaining a school’s positive image.

Swap (1987) stated:

There are three good reasons to involve parents:

1. Parent involvement benefits children.
2. Where parents and teachers work successfully together, teachers report experiencing support and appreciation from parents and a rekindling of student enthusiasm for problem solving.
3. Schools benefit from access to resources that parents bring. (p. 47)

Parent Governance in Schools

Restructuring efforts over the past 2 decades put processes into place to change the traditional relationship between parents and teachers. The roles of parents expanded into new arenas, while the roles of teachers were changing (Murphy, 1990). New roles for parents

included that of customer or consumer of educational services as opportunities for school choice expanded. Parents took new roles in school governance as they were empowered to participate in decision-making forums (Hess, 1991). At the same time, local school districts were being called on to find ways of "giving teachers a greater voice in school decisions" (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986, p. 57). These changes often created tensions between teachers and parents in assessing their respective roles.

Restructured schools in the 1990s leaned toward changing the governing pattern of formally defined and specified roles to more flexible role definitions (Whelage et al., 1992). At that time research found that as teachers worked together to create a mission for their school, they engaged in curriculum decisions, devised learning activities, and frequently collaborated with administrators in the development of school policy (Raywid, 1990; Wohlstetter, 1994). Likewise, because of the possible consumer relationship that schools of choice established with students, and thus with parents, parents were more likely to assume broader and more varied roles than in nonchoice schools (Blank, 1983; Raywid, 1990).

With the advent of NCLB legislation, restructured schools lost Local Education Agency (LEA) control and site-based decision making was diminished or lost altogether. In many of these schools, though, parents were actively sought to be a part of the development of the vision for the school in restructuring. Often, this marked the first time parents in these typically urban schools were asked to participate in governance activities (DiBiase, 2005).

Site-based management is another mechanism whereby role relationships in schools are changing. Malen et al. (1990) defined site-based management as a process in which some formal authority to make decisions in the domains of budget, personnel, and program was delegated to and often distributed among site-level individuals. Some formal structure (e.g., council,

committee, board, team) often composed of principals, teachers, parents, and, at times, students and community members was created so that site participants could be involved in school wide decision making.

Similarly, Marburger (1985) defined school-based management as a decentralized form of organization in which the power and the decisions made by the superintendent and school board were shared with those who were closest to the students: teachers, the principal, parents, citizens, and other students at each local school. Under site-based management plans, especially those that attempted to establish governing boards or councils, teachers found themselves face to face with parents and members of the local community, debating issues of budget and finance, personnel and safety and building security that once were the prerogative of administrators (Easton et al., 1993).

Although the literature acknowledged the tension created at the local school level between administrators and teachers in deciding the extent of teacher participation and the delineation of who makes what decisions, little was stated about the possible tension that could develop between teachers and parents on these same matters (Clune & White, 1988). The call for teacher empowerment frequently ignores the role of parents in participatory decision making.

As a mandate of NCLB (2002), many districts actively involved parents in decision making and many of these programs proved to be successful. Comer developed a school reform program called School Development Program that featured several teams that monitored and developed the school plan. One of these teams was a parent team (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory [NWREL], 2001). In the Accelerated Schools model, “parent and community involvement is built into participatory governance structure” (NWREL, 2001, n.p.). Each of these models showed student success through test scores.

Parent Volunteerism

Children can benefit from parent volunteerism due to a parent's access and interaction in the school setting. These parents could learn how the school system works and potentially manipulate the system in favor of their children (Lareau, 2000).

It is typical for a parent's volunteerism to follow the child from grade to grade and for that volunteerism to be directly related to the activities of the child in the school. Depending on their socioeconomic status, parents differ in their views of volunteerism. Most white, middle class parents saw volunteerism as a part of parenting, while minority and low income parents viewed volunteerism as a way to connect the school to the community (Naples, 1992).

Parent Participation and Empowerment

Parent participation and empowerment were two possible ways in which parents could be involved in schools and could exercise influence. *Participation* referred to the involvement of parents in providing input or being consulted about school affairs or their children's progress without exercising influence. *Empowerment* referred to the parents' role in exercising influence within a school, typically through decision-making forums and usually accompanied by legitimated sources of power and authority (Goldring & Shapira, 1993).

Some of the literature on site-based management stressed the governance role of parents in assuring that all teachers were highly competent and cared about their children and that schools provided the best possible conditions for educating their children (Hess, 1991; Wohlstetter, 1994; Wohlstetter & Anderson, 1994). However, changing the historic role of parents has been problematic. Hill and Bonan (1991) found that in most schools parents formed an attentive and sometimes critical audience for staff performance. Some parent groups tried to assume day-to-day control of a school or exercise veto power over staff actions. They preferred

to hold staff accountable, as they would other professional service providers whom they encountered, but not to dictate the terms of professional practice.

The difficulty of involving parents in school-wide decision making was undoubtedly related to the professional culture of the school and parents' reluctance to violate the professional norms of school culture. As Malen et al. (1990) observed, it was likely that, although school-based management created opportunities for parents to be involved in school-wide decisions, there was little evidence that professional-client relationships were altered substantially.

Even where choice was provided, evidence existed that some parents made an initial choice of a school and then delegated responsibility to the school for their child's education, exempting their own involvement (Bauch & Goldring, 1995). Some public schools of choice, particularly specialty schools that had the unified mission of providing all students with a similar curriculum, had higher levels of parental involvement and experienced more effective communication between teachers and parents (Bauch & Goldring).

Parent-Teacher Participation

In dual empowerment or partnership, parents were empowered and teacher professionalism was evident. This implied that there could be greater power and influence on both sides and for the educational system as a whole when power was exercised collaboratively (Golby, 1993). This pattern assumed the presence of shared community values about the purpose of education (Coleman & Hoffer, 1993) and the exercise of a democratic discourse in order to arrive at mutually agreed on decisions (Strike, 1993). From this arrangement, one can sketch some characteristics of parent-teacher power relationships based on four different states of affairs.

Under a traditional or bureaucratic model in which hierarchical roles and relationships predominante or remain unchanged, low-teacher and low-parent participation were characterized by a deference to power. Teachers, although maintaining classroom autonomy, deferred to administrators; parents deferred to teachers and administrators. This model cast parents in the role of patrons of the school who, for the most part, were passive and accepting of the word of the school (Crowson, 1992). This was the historic model under which typical small town and rural communities operated by hiring teachers who reflected the values of the community and in which boards, superintendents, and parents deferred to the community power elites (Peshkin, 1978). However, under restructuring parents and teachers struggled to identify their respective roles and to negotiate governance issues between the district and the school level or between parents and teachers. This model might be similar to the limited governance model Easton et al. (1993) identified in Chicago, where teachers and administrators controlled the agenda, and where parents, for the most part, accepted decisions recommended by the school.

Under the teacher professionalism model in which teachers attempted to reconstruct their knowledge about teaching and learning practices (McDonald, 1986; Sergiovanni, 1994; Shulman, 1987), high-teacher, low-parent participation was characterized by privileged professional expertise and parents' voices often went unheard. Teachers view their knowledge base as a source of power. This model casts parents in the role of *indirect clients* of the school, whereby teachers know what is best for children and parents. According to Strike (1993), a client was someone who was consulted and considered in decision making and who might have some right to informed consent but was not a full participant in decision making. Thus, the relationship is conceptualized as one of unequal status and power.

This model predicted that professional autonomy, including teacher empowerment at the school level, could be in direct conflict with active parent involvement (Lightfoot, 1981; Lindle & Boyd, 1991). Some studies suggested that teacher professionalism was associated with low levels of parental involvement. Bauch and Goldring (1995) found that parents who trusted the professional ability of teachers were less likely to be involved in schools.

This model also cast parents in the role of customer. For example, schools undergoing restructuring attempted to develop programs for parents from a public relations perspective (Crowson, 1992). Under school choice arrangements, parents might not necessarily be involved in school decision making but they might exert influence due to their ability to remove a student from a school (Raywid, 1990).

Whereas parents as clients or customers may be consulted about school improvements, their participation is limited. For example, while parents may influence how parents and teachers communicate with one another, they may have little or no influence on the implementation of new school programs.

Under the parent empowerment model, parents were actively involved in their children's school, either as parent advocates and activists or as vocal members of elected school councils (Epstein, 1995). This low-teacher, high-parent participation model suggested that parents were actively engaged in influencing school processes and outcomes in their role as advocates or activists. These parents, as individuals or collectives, often exercised political influence or made demands on the school for change (Hollister, 1979). In this model, parents engaged in oversight or *checking* activities, making sure that their children's needs were being met. Similarly, in a parent empowerment model of parent-teacher relations, parents could form pressure groups and

coalitions that would campaign on their behalf, exercise their right to vote, or become candidates for office; they could also seek enforcement of their rights through the courts (Woods, 1993).

Under a partnership or communal model, one that Glatter and Woods (1992) referred to as dual empowerment, parents and teachers worked together to meet the needs of individual children and to develop schools as strong learning and caring communities. Both groups had legitimate sources of power or influence. The high-teacher, high-parent participation model viewed both parents and teachers as "part of a participatory community with 'external' as well as internal participants" (Glatter, & Woods, 1992, p. 7). Sometimes, the politics of power produced conflict and disharmony but often the politics of partnership stressed equity and caring relationships (Epstein, 1993).

This model placed parents and teachers in the role of community members (Henry, 1994; Strike, 1993). In this model, all stakeholders were empowered to have increased influence, implying that all participants needed to operate not only with authority and influence in their respective roles but also with duties as well as responsibilities. Although teachers might regret the loss of control over the educational environment, the social and moral development of young people could become the joint responsibility of the home and the school (Hargreaves, 1994).

Weiss (1992), referring to the literature on organizational learning in her research on teacher participation in school-based decision making, suggested an important rationale for shared participation opportunities that fits the partnership model. The organization learned only when it domesticated new knowledge, poked it, shaped it, and added its own brand of seasoning. The new knowledge had to be shared, its meaning for the organization had to be constructed through interactive discourse, and it had to be accepted by consensus in the organization.

This position advocated providing legitimate opportunities for discourse among all organizational members to share in meaningful discussions facing schools. Strike (1993) argued for "transforming local schools into deliberative communities that seek rational consensus about their work through open and undominated discussion" (p. 266).

Coleman and Tabin (1992) addressed the nature of the interrelationships of parents and teachers that might promote a collaborative partnership. They claimed that teachers must be more active in permitting parent collaboration. Teachers must grant parents their rights and responsibilities in the collaboration process, arrange for various kinds of parent-teacher conversations, provide parents with knowledge of the curriculum and methodology, provide activities that parents and their children can do together, and accept their role as an instructional mediator between parents and children. Hargreaves (1994) referred to this type of collaboration as *new professionalism*.

Frutcher, Galletta, and White (1992) found that parents tended to participate in activities in which they were interested such as bake sales, field trips, PTA social gatherings, or student performances. The level of parent involvement increases as parents are involved in activities they like doing. Schools, though, often need volunteers for activities that may not be entertaining or enjoyable. It is suggested that parents begin their participation in high interest activities and move into activities that are not as comfortable such as reading with individual or small groups of students. A school must establish interactive engagement and not just passive attendance at events like school plays or PTA meetings in order truly to experience successful family involvement (Chen, 2001).

Parent Involvement and NCLB

NCLB mentioned parent involvement more than 100 times (Puriefoy, 2005). In his policy narrative, President George Bush stated, “Parents, armed with data, are the best forces of accountability in education” (Bush, n.p.). The law prescribed three areas for parents to have more power in their children’s education: test accountability, school choice, and involvement.

Under test accountability, failing schools are penalized and all schools are forced to communicate this status to families. This allows parents to see how their schools are performing. The numbers of parents who reported they were aware of NCLB increased from 22% to 45% between 2003 and 2005 (Rose & Gallup, 2005). But, in one Massachusetts study, fewer than one in four parents knew that their children were in low performing schools (Howell, 2006) and in the Rose and Gallup study, fewer than one out of six parents believed a single test could give a fair picture of the success of a school.

School choice allowed parents to remove their children from schools that did not improve. In 2005-2006, less than two percent of students and their parents in the United States took advantage of school choice (Jennings, 2006). Many parents had trouble finding a place within their district where they could move their child. In Philadelphia, there was only space for 1,240 students in high performing schools, though over one hundred thousand students were enrolled in low performing schools and eligible for NCLB’s choice policy (Casserly, 2004). Through parent involvement, NCLB required schools to increase parent engagement opportunities. NCLB defined parental involvement as:

- regular, two-way, meaningful communication involving student academic
- learning and other school activities, including ensuring:
- that parents play an integral role in assisting their child’s learning;

- that parents need to be actively involved in their child's education at school;
- that information needs to be understandable; and
- that parents need to participate in school activities such as parent conferences, trainings on effective parenting strategies, understanding child and adolescent development, volunteering, learning at home, decision making such as through PTA, Site Councils and other parent advisory groups and committees. (NCLB, 2001, n.p.)

According to federal law, districts are to spend a minimum of one percent of Title I funds to build parent engagement opportunities. The National PTA reported that in 2005 only 21% of members believed the parental involvement conditions were being implemented fully (National PTA, 2005). The main complaint was that the federal government was not enforcing that segment of the act (Davis, 2004).

Rogers (2006) reported that a group of parents and concerned community members with misgivings about NCLB formed a group called Parent U-Turn that took the failings of the NCLB policy and developed a public power narrative to empower parents. Parent U-Turn considered three questions: Why do schools fail poor students?; How do poor parents take action?; and How do informed and engaged parents create change? The questions compared the three parts of the NCLB policy narrative and the public power narrative. In the area of accountability, for example, the NCLB listed the reasons for failure of poor students as low expectations, unclear goals, and weak accountability; however, the public power narrative asserted that the community devalues the poor and provides unequal and inadequate learning opportunities. The Public Power narrative suggested that parents must form organized groups and that the collective action of many

members would more likely effect change in low performing schools than the actions of individuals working alone.

Barriers to Parent Involvement

Studies showed that parents desired to be involved in their children's education. Johnson (1991) identified general reasons for lack of parental involvement: 1) feelings of inadequacy, 2) feeling that they are not literate enough, and 3) uncertainty about how to further promote learning for their child at home.

Barriers to parent involvement in schools were often led by attitudinal factors, such as: resistance toward increasing family-school cooperation, stereotyping, not viewing differences as strengths, blaming, and labeling. Difficulty in communication due to limited education or a language barrier could hinder involvement, though this does not indicate a lack of desire of parents to be involved (Hansen, 2006). Hormuth (2005) reported a study by the U.S. Department of Education indicating that positive parent-school contact decreased as children got older or as negative contacts increased.

Tinkler (2002) identified five classifications of barriers to parent involvement: 1) lack of training on the part of the teacher on ways in which to involve parents; 2) language and culture; 3) parents' level of education; 4) parents' negative view of school from past experiences; and 5) logistical barriers, such as time, childcare, and transportation. Lack of skill in managing involvement was seen as a barrier to parent volunteerism and governance by some teachers and administrators (O'Conner, 2001). Studies showed that low-income parents appreciated education as a means of increasing economic and social mobility (Scott-Jones, 1995) but their involvement often fell short of teacher and administrator expectations (Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Linek,

Rasinski, and Harkins (1997) noted that a majority of teachers were dissatisfied with parent involvement, citing a lack of interest in or concern about school. There was no doubt that parent involvement increased in the public arena, yet teachers and administrators still believed that not all parents were sufficiently involved (Eccles & Harold, 1996).

As reported by Lareau (1987) in a comparison of two first grade classrooms, the classroom in a lower income area had less parent involvement than did the middle-income school. Low income families frequently had less flexibility in their schedules, which hindered their opportunities for involvement. Cultural, as well as socioeconomic issues, presented barriers to student involvement. Often, Mexican-American parents saw school as the focus of learning and observed a respectful distance from the school setting. These parents did not want to interfere with what they viewed as teachers' professional duties (Carrasquillo & London, 1993).

Teachers often are ill prepared to deal with parents and other adults. This lack of education can present yet another barrier to communication between home and school, further restricting possibilities for parent involvement. Preservice teacher education did little to train teachers to foster successful working relationships with parents because it was not addressed in traditional teacher education programs (Lazar & Slostad, 1999). Some teachers asserted they did not have the authority to instigate home-school networking (Henry, 1996).

One theory that explained the differences in the level of parent involvement was Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital. According to that theory, schools represented and reproduced middle or upper class values and forms of communication. Schools embodied those values because teachers came from predominantly middle or upper class backgrounds. Thus, teachers were able to communicate effectively with middle and upper class parents who shared similar beliefs but had difficulty relating to parents from a different cultural frame of reference or

disposition. The bias toward middle or upper class values put working class students and parents at a distinct disadvantage because they had to adapt to the dominant culture of the school to meet teacher expectations. The process promoted involvement of middle and upper class parents, while limiting the involvement of those with lower socioeconomic status. On the basis of that observation, Bourdieu theorized that differences in the level of parent involvement could lead to the development of status relations among groups.

Lareau (1987) borrowed Bourdieu's (1977) notion of cultural capital but related it more directly to parent involvement. Lareau stated that indicators of cultural capital included: (a) amount of interaction a parent has with other parents; (b) parents' understanding of school processes; (c) amount of contact parents have with school personnel; and (d) parents' communication skills. Lareau determined that upper middle-class parents were more likely to become involved in school activities, whereas working-class parents were more likely to embrace a supportive but less involved role. She also found that teachers gave better evaluations of students if their parents were involved in the school. Those findings were significant because they suggested that cultural capital, brought to life in the form of parent involvement, could influence student achievement.

Although the idea of cultural capital informed many theories related to parent involvement, a similar construct, termed social capital, also appeared frequently in the literature. Developed by Coleman (1988), social capital referred to social networks available to parents that enhanced a student's ability to benefit from educational opportunities. According to Coleman (1990), all schools had social structures that influenced student achievement. Some schools had stronger relationships with families than other schools and, therefore, were able to promote higher levels of achievement. Other factors that influenced social capital included the school's

understanding of its obligation to students, parents' knowledge of the school system, and the existence of norms that supported high student achievement (Coleman, 1990).

Another theory that explained differences in levels of parent involvement was reported by Bowles and Gintis (2001). The researchers suggested that there were major structural differences among schools in relation to the social class they served. From that perspective, schools in working-class neighborhoods tended to be regimented and controlled by the school administration, whereas those in wealthy areas had more flexibility toward parent input. Bowles and Gintis (2001) reported that those differences were related to workplace values and representative of the varying expectations of teachers and parents from backgrounds of different classes. Based on this theory, parents from poor communities, on average, were less involved in their schools than were parents from wealthier communities.

Characteristics such as age, experience, racial composition, and disposition toward parents might affect teachers' ability to work with parents as well as their interest in doing so. For example, according to Kerbow and Bernhardt (1993), schools with large percentages of African American teachers had higher levels of parent involvement with their African American students and parents than did similarly situated schools with primarily Caucasian teachers.

With regard to student characteristics, factors such as average socioeconomic status and minority composition played a crucial role in determining the level of parent involvement (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993). Kerbow and Bernhardt as well as Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) demonstrated that the higher the average socioeconomic status of a school, the more likely parents were to contact the school for academic reasons, to volunteer, and to attend PTA meetings. In addition, Kerbow and Bernhardt found that the minority composition of the student body was important in determining the level of parent participation. In their research, schools

with large minority populations had higher levels of parent involvement in the area of academic and PTAs than did schools with similar socioeconomic profiles. Finally, Shouse (1997) found that issues associated with the school including the nature of the setting (rural, suburban, or urban), size, academic focus, climate, and sense of community might influence levels of parent participation.

The disadvantages for parents whose culture or lifestyle differs from that of the dominant culture take a number of forms. Some teachers see uninvolved parents as uncaring. When parents were unable to be involved with the school, the teachers might have a lower subjective opinion of the children; consequently, they might have lower academic gains (Hill & Craft, 2003).

Griffith (1996) studied parent involvement and satisfaction and found that there was no significant relationship between parent involvement and satisfaction. Parents might participate in activities at their children's schools even if they were not satisfied with the school. Lawson (2003) posited that there were different perceptions of parent involvement between parents and teachers. Both groups focused on the child but teachers tended to be school centric, meaning their concern was for the child within the school environment and how that affected the culture of the school. On the other hand, parents tended to be community centric, meaning their concern was for the child as a member of the community and society.

Summary

The research and literature indicated that parent volunteerism and governance in a child's school could be beneficial to the child. Parents do not always know the best way to implement that involvement, and teachers are often unsure how to encourage the involvement. It is

imperative that teachers learn how to verbalize their needs to parents and that parents, in turn, tell teachers ways in which to make them feel more welcome and the best avenues for communicating the teachers' needs.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 provides a description of the design and methods used to conduct the investigation into the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding parent involvement in schools. Qualitative research attempts to describe events in as much detail and complexity as possible, determine how those events emerged into the current state, and identify ways in which individuals comprehend that development. The intent of this qualitative research was to learn from teachers and parents: to hear from the teachers what they truly needed in the school with regard to parent involvement, and to hear from the parents both the ways in which schools could extend a more effective welcome and the types of activities in which they were most willing to participate.

To examine the potential differences in the manner in which parents and teachers viewed the role of parents in schools, the following research questions were posed:

Question 1: What types of parent involvement occur in schools?

Question 2: What are specific types of parent involvement teachers prefer?

Question 3: Are there specific types of parent involvement that teachers deem intrusive or inappropriate?

Question 4: What types of involvement do parents prefer?

Question 5: What types of involvement in schools do parents find distasteful?

Question 6: How do teachers communicate parent involvement needs?

Question 7: How aware are parents of opportunities for involvement?

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the subjects of the study, define the data gathering instruments, explain the process by which the interviews were administered, and delineate the procedures for analysis of data obtained through research.

Design of the Study

The design of this study was based upon a heuristic case approach. This type of qualitative research illuminates the understanding of educational phenomenon. It explains the background of a situation and increases its potential for application (Merriam, 1998). This study explored attitudes and beliefs concerning parent involvement in schools, particularly toward volunteerism and governance, through interviewing subjects who served as teachers and were parents or guardians of children in public Title I schools in Johnson City, Carter County, and Washington County, Tennessee. Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling were used to select subjects. In snowball sampling, the initial participants or groups of participants refer the researcher to other participants (Patton, 1990) and the interviews continue until redundancy in the data is achieved. The first round of sampling incorporated family-school coordinators and the coordinating teacher for Title I family engagement about parents who participated in governance and volunteerism in the Title I schools. Teacher interviewees were selected from those who had indicated to their principals positive and negative experiences in parental volunteerism and governance. The primary method of data collection was through semi-structured individual and focus group interviews. An emergent design process allowed flexibility during the interview process. Three focus group interviews were convened and 10 teacher interviews were conducted.

The researcher's work as a teacher-trainer for Appalachian Education Laboratories for the region for the past several years provided access to teachers in the surrounding counties. This

network of relationships assisted the researcher in building trust and rapport with those being interviewed. Parent contacts were more difficult in unfamiliar areas; thus, school leaders in those areas connected the researcher with parents to interview.

The Role of the Researcher

At the start of a qualitative study, the researcher is a learner (Stainback & Stainback, 1988). Stainback and Stainback noted that participants could be more open and share deeper levels of their experiences by not assuming a critical viewpoint or a stern evaluative position from the researcher. As the research progressed, questions might be altered in an effort to have a deeper understanding of the issues that were initially apparent in the study (Pryswansky & Noblit, 1990).

Middleman and Goldberg-Wood (1995) stated there was “no reality apart from one’s construction of it in dialogue with others, and there are as many constructions of reality as there are experiencing” (p. 8). Becvar, Canfield, and Becvar (1997) explained that the interactions between the researcher and the participants included, but were not limited to, initial questions, follow-up questions, prompts and paraphrasing that “cannot help but influence the nature of the story” (p.10) of each of those involved in this type of research. During this combination of ideas, an understanding of the issue being studied would be created (Middleman & Goldberg-Wood, 1995). The narrative of a qualitative study relies heavily on the researcher to tell the story.

Qualitative inquiry usually details stories filled with emotion, close to people, and practical (Creswell, 2003). Thus, the researcher must assume the role of a participant in the research (Lincoln, 1991). The researcher must attempt, however, to distinguish between being emic (open to the views of the participants) and being etic (recognizing one’s own interpretation

of the stories being told) (Creswell, 2003). The researcher took great care to remain emic in this study.

An emergent design process permitted the interviewer to allow the course of the interview to flow according to the thoughts of the participants and granted them the time and opportunity to express their opinions, though the interviewer maintained the overall focus of the questioning. The researcher maintained objectivity throughout the study and reflected regularly to ensure this position.

Validity of the Study

Readers of qualitative research studies specifically look for the validity and reliability of the study in order to determine if the results are trustworthy or merit attention (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985). Four main terms found in qualitative research establish trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These terms have quantitative correlates that are based on specific constructs. The methods by which the researcher addresses these topics ensure the reader that the study is trustworthy.

The qualitative researcher in this study was an involved participant. Despite this active involvement, trustworthiness was established. The mere acknowledgement of a bias by the researcher does not diminish trustworthiness; it actually enhances it. Because the researcher was open and aware of possible bias, there was assurances that it would not directly affect or influence the study (Hammersley & Gomm, 1997).

Researchers refer to the term credibility concerning the topic of truth-value (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985). Credibility in this study was ensured by using three strategies: (a) a significant amount of time in the field was spent gathering data; (b) a variety of school-level stakeholders in

parent involvement were interviewed (parents and teachers); and (c) participants were able to review their responses to ensure that bias did not misrepresent the intent (member checking) (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985). These strategies were used until a full description of the topic being studied was uncovered. According to Mertens (1998), researchers should continue the study until they had “confidence that themes and examples are repeating instead of extending” (p. 181).

Transferability determined whether or not the study could be generalized to other situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was determined by offering full descriptions of parent and teacher attitudes toward parent involvement. This significance was evaluated through the context of the participants’ responses. Dependability referenced the topic of consistency (Lincoln & Guba). Throughout the data gathering and analysis, an outside auditor evaluated the researcher’s processes to ensure credibility. The auditor was not directly involved in this study but was familiar with the research process and regularly examined the transcripts to ensure dependability. Confirmability or neutrality (Lincoln & Guba) was also ensured by the auditor.

Ethical Protocol

Before the study began, the following procedures were completed. Authorization from the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board (ETSU-IRB) was obtained. Permission was also obtained from the school systems involved in the study. The administration of the school systems and schools was given assurances that the names of participants would be confidential and anonymous. Pseudonyms were used to conceal identities. After being selected to participate, the participant was asked to read and sign the informed consent document. The participants were told that their participation was voluntary and that they might choose not to

participate or to withdraw at any time in the process. They were informed that their answers would be kept confidential and that they would remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms in the study. Participants were informed that audio recording of the interview would be made and permission was requested to use quotes in the final report. The interviewees were offered access to the final report, if they wanted, before it was published. They were informed that all data would be stored in a locked cabinet and saved securely for 5 years. This procedure was followed for one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews; however, participants in the focus group had a private room separate from the other participants to respond and ask questions regarding informed consent.

Data Collection

After obtaining authorization from ETSU-IRB and permission from the principals of Title I schools and directors of schools of the systems for the study, each interviewee was contacted and provided with a letter of explanation of the study. Personal individual interviews with teachers were conducted in their classrooms. To conduct a sound qualitative study, a realistic site must be chosen. Marshall and Rossman (1999) defined a realistic site as one where entry was possible, the researcher was likely to build trusting relations with the participants in the study and the data quality and credibility of the study were reasonably assured.

Focus group interviews were held in a conference room at the school. The focus groups consisted of four to seven parents or guardians of children in the school. These participants had not necessarily participated in school volunteerism or governance. Merton et al. (1990) suggested that,

the size of the group should manifestly be governed by two considerations...it should not be so large as to be unwieldy or to preclude adequate participation by most members nor should it be so small that it fails to provide substantially greater coverage than that of an interview with one individual. (p.137)

However, the number of participants depended on the objectives of the research (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). For example, smaller groups (4-6 people) were preferable when the participants had a great deal to share about the topic or had intense or lengthy experiences with the topic of discussion (Kreuger, 1988). The objective of this study was to create a comfort level in order for the interview questions to be answered candidly and to allow natural discussion to take place. Four focus group interviews were convened. Krueger stated, “one important determinant of the number of the groups is the number of subgroups required . . . if there are several distinct population segments . . . you may want or need to run separate groups in each” (1988, p.42). Some parents were chosen because of their active involvement in the schools, while others were asked to participate because they had little school involvement. These parents’ names were produced by the snowball sampling technique.

Initially, an interview guide was developed based directly on the research questions but general enough not to lead the interviewee. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) suggested that the questions be ordered from general to specific with more important questions placed at the top of the guide. This allowed a funnel approach, which quickly engaged the interest of the participants. The questions were semi-structured and open-ended as suggested by Kreuger (1988). A tape recorder was used to record the interview.

Before the parent and teacher interviews, the researcher conducted a pilot study in two parts: 1) Shared the interview questions with an experienced interviewer and 2) Held practice

interviews with teachers and parents to hone the researcher's interview skills and refine the interview questions. The participants were selected from the schools on which the study is based. Feedback from the pilot study allowed determination of specific areas for improvement. Data from the pilot studies were not used in the research findings.

Permission was obtained from school system directors and school level administrators to interview teachers on campus. Permission to record and transcribe each interview was obtained from each interviewee. The participants were guaranteed anonymity. All data recordings and transcriptions are being held in a secure location, a locked cabinet in the researcher's home.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed throughout the process. Phenomenological analysis was used to “ferret out the essence or basic structure of a phenomenon” (Merriam, 1998, p. 158). Data analysis was done in and out of the field.

The data were coded into units and organized into categories with similar characteristics. This was compared with field notes and personal reflections to find unified themes and common threads. Theory was developed as these commonalities surfaced.

A constant comparative analysis was used for data analysis. Constant comparative analysis involved taking one piece of data and comparing it with all others that might be similar or different in order to develop assumptions about the possible relationships among various pieces of data. This process continued with the comparison of each new interview or account until all were compared (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to construct a theoretical framework explaining the amount and types of involvement teachers desired from parents; to discover the types of involvement that school personnel found intrusive or inappropriate; to determine the types of involvement that interested parents; and to discern ways in which schools could more effectively communicate with, invite, and welcome parents and their involvement in the educational process and workings of the public school setting. The study involved collecting data through open-ended, one-on-one interviews with 10 Title I elementary school teachers and focus group interviews with 18 parents from the same Title I schools as the teachers. Purposeful sampling was used, selecting teachers who had indicated to their principals that had either positive or negative experiences with parent involvement in the past. Initial parent contacts were obtained through the school system Title I Consulting Teacher for Parent Involvement. The research examined the perspectives of parents and teachers related to the following research questions:

1. What types of parent involvement occur in schools?
2. What are specific types of parent involvement teachers prefer?
3. Are there specific types of parent involvement that teachers deem intrusive or inappropriate?
4. What types of involvement do parents prefer?
5. What types of involvement in schools do parents find distasteful?
6. How do teachers communicate parent involvement needs?
7. How aware are parents of opportunities for involvement?

Results

Eleven constructs were identified related to what parents and teachers perceived to be benefits and negatives, endorsements and supports, regarding successful parent involvement in schools. These 11 constructs were: (a) culture, (b) perception, (c) communication, (d) insight, (e) appreciation, (f) commitment, (g) motivations, (h) opportunity, (i) dedication, (j) the greater good, and (k) education.

Culture

One factor parents and teachers deemed key to successful parent involvement was a welcoming school culture. Teachers and parents noted principal leadership as setting the culture of a school. Many praised principals for their examples and guidance in welcoming families.

Radcliff, a 4th grade teacher with 15 years experience, served with her current principal for almost a decade. Radcliff credited her principal with “paving a way” for families “to connect with the school.” She stated:

I think the way [principal] handles things makes [sic] a huge difference. She encourages somehow, maybe the way she works with parents and they work with her. I think the way she interacts between staff and parents help a lot as a communicator. She makes a difference.

Rooster, also an upper elementary teacher, said the same principal worked continually to communicate the needs of the teaching staff to the parent leaders of PTA, consistently asking “What is on the forefront of what you really want?” Then it is communicated, that simple.”

Three of the four Title I elementary schools in this study underwent changes in school leadership in the 3 years preceding the study. Two of the four schools experienced more than one

change in leadership during that time, giving parents and teachers opportunities to draw interesting comparisons of the effects of principal leadership on school culture.

Jameson, a working parent who dropped her son off every morning and spent about half an hour helping out before going into work, noticed the manner of her school's current principal. "One of the biggest things is that we have a new principal and he visits the classrooms every day. He knows his teachers and he knows the students. He calls many of them by name, parents, too. I admire that."

The teachers from that campus, like Hopper, a 5-year veteran, applauded the new principal's strides toward increasing parent involvement, "I think [the school] does a good job of providing lots of opportunities for involvement and [the principal] also welcomes people in to be a part of what we do here, monthly reading and math programs, that kind of thing."

Fitzsimmons, who also had 5 years of teaching experience, 2 years in a local county system and newly tenured in one of the systems studied, credited the new principal's "open door policy" as the school's "greatest strength," explaining: "He makes it clear that the door is always open and he actually encourages parents to come in and be a part of things." He continued, "[principal] is a big contrast to our last principal's approach when the door wasn't even open for teachers."

Redd, an active school volunteer and PTA leader, expressed confidence in the new principal as well stating that she believed the leadership change helped shape teacher success. "It really helps when the teachers know that the principal is there for them."

Parents at yet another system school with a newly tenured principal also touted their new principal's accessibility. Vanderbilt, a seasoned 50-something mother with a range of children from a college sophomore to her youngest, a rising third grader, remarked, "I have never found

[principal] to be anything more than completely helpful and accommodating. I think I could go and talk to him about anything.” This was a sharp contrast to her description of the school’s former principal who “removed benches because parents were spending so much time hanging out in the lobby.”

Madison, a teacher with 20 years experience who had served at the school since its inception, described the former principal as one who “liked to have a firm grip on everyone’s comings and goings, teachers, students and their parents.” She called the new principal “refreshing” with “high standards, great expectations, but open arms and listening ears.”

Radcliff, who taught at the campus that experienced no recent leadership change, celebrated her principal’s contributions to a culture friendly to healthy home-school relations:

I see a principal who leads the parents and staff well and puts everyone on equal footing with an expectation for everyone to work on behalf of all students’ welfare. The positive parent involvement here stems a lot from [principal’s name] and what she expects.

Aside from principal leadership, teachers and parents interviewed agreed that office staff demeanor was a steering factor in creating a family-friendly school culture. Shears, a single working mom of a high school freshman and a fifth grader, often took her lunch hours to visit the school lunchroom and assist wherever needed. She stated, “I know that my involvement has radically changed over the last few years; to me, the new office staff just doesn’t feel welcoming.”

This was interestingly one of the two campuses where parents and teachers noted positive changes in a welcoming culture due to changes in principal leadership. According to the interviews, on this campus, though leadership advanced the concept, office staff brought a regression in family-friendliness. Duncan, a former middle grades teacher turned stay-at-home

mom, asked other focus group parents from her school, “Do you feel like when you walk into the office that the staff is often sort of sassy?” She observed:

I feel a lot of the time they are yelling at you and they are mad and questioning you like “Where are you going?” I usually go to the back door when I come to get [daughter] because then I don’t have to face them, because they are not friendly at all.

Lipton, a single mom of two elementary school girls who has 3 of her 4 years at the school as PTA President, shared that she fielded “lots of complaints about the way [school’s office staff] handle people,” noting that “not feeling welcome is definitely a problem.” Lipton, who recently returned to college to study elementary education, just completed a semester of observations as part of her coursework, many of which took place on another campus in the study. She spoke of a marked difference in the reception she received at the other school:

I will tell you that when I did my observations at [name of other school], I got to see how an office staff should welcome people. Even though I was just a lowly college student, they never made me feel unwelcome. They were very nice.

Parents and teachers interviewed from the campus Lipton spoke of also gave high marks to their office staff for embracing parents on their entry to the school. Breeding, a stay-at-home mom of three girls and active not only in PTA but in a number of other community organizations, noted, “Yes, the [name of school] office is almost too friendly where I feel the need to break away and get on to the classroom sometimes [laughs].”

On another campus where teachers and parents gave their principal credit for welcoming its parents, the same parents and teachers expressed appreciation for their school office staff’s contributions to creating a family-friendly site. Kara, an educator for almost 30 years with various K-8 experience, remarked:

The [home-school coordinator] is really good. She and the whole office do a great job. I don't know everything that goes on there. I just think parents are not discouraged from being here. There is almost a welcoming benevolence, like a missionary outlook in regards to our children and parents here.

Whether in face-to-face encounters or through phone interactions, the disposition of the school office staff projected a message regarding the school relationship to its student families. Arthur, a former high school teacher and current stay-at-home mom of three children, the eldest a second grader, noticed, "It seems like sometimes when you call the office, they are just trying to send out a message, 'Break those apron strings and just send your kid to school.'"

Comments were also made by and about teachers regarding their impact on an inviting school culture. Hart, a 24 year old mom of three elementary school students, shared, "I have always heard that there are teachers who don't want you there, but that has not been my experience."

Madison, who taught on that campus, reflected a corresponding creed. "I think we should make parents feel wanted and needed and comfortable and accepted. A majority of our clientele don't have much more than a high school education. We try to make them at ease and not intimidated."

Fitzsimmons faithfully resounded his campus cohort, "We always let parents know that we are glad for them to come in and help out." Unfortunately, some interviewees revealed other truths about Fitzsimmons' home school; remarks of parents from that campus, like Lipton, noted:

I have only had two times that teachers have made me feel like I was stepping on their toes and invading their space and what is funny both times I was doing things for them. Evidently, they didn't like it when I just walked into their room.

That particular campus had undergone radical changes because it had been recently re-created as a signature school, a school designed around a specific area of study. Numerous federal and local grants and awards allowed the school to overhaul its equipment, resources, and staff, including the introduction of many new teachers. One parent, Shears, stated that, “the teachers are just glad to have a job and have their foot in the door, they aren’t really invested, they are just using [school name] as a starting point. That is one reason why I don’t feel welcomed there.” Some interviewees shared very telling remarks about the degree of classroom involvement some teachers desired from parents. These boundaries definitely implied the nature of the school’s culture toward parent involvement.

Some teachers, like True, a well-versed educator, spoke of her open-door style, “As long as they do not disrupt negatively, parents are always welcome in my classroom.” Other educators interviewed unashamedly shared a much less receptive picture of their classroom culture. “You know, sometimes it can turn into trouble when they end up coming through your door too much, but there again that doesn’t mean you close the door, you just don’t always open it,” said Rooster, a former marketing executive now in her 10th year of teaching. If Rooster’s remarks seemed to draw a fine line between boundaries and roadblocks, Levy, the interviewee with the most years of experience, built a brick wall between parents and her classroom. “Just the fact that [parents] would even come near my desk to look around was a sign that their involvement was probably not appropriate.”

Adams, mom of a second grader, seemed angered to have hit a similar wall in the past: First grade was great, but [child] second grade teacher didn’t want us [parents] there. I asked her on a couple of occasions how I could help her in the classroom and she dismissed my question and changed the subject. She would meet me at the door almost

like she was drawing a line that I wasn't supposed to cross. I thought to myself, it will be a cold day when they tell me I can't just walk into my own kid's classroom.

Charmin, who grew up as the daughter of an elementary educator and was mom of a second grade student, recounted a remark made by the teacher as they walked into the school together when she dropped off her daughter for class: "Maybe, you don't need to walk her to class anymore." Charmin's face was flushed as she angrily recalled the early fall morning. "We had a ritual of walking into the school together. We had been doing this since [my daughter was in] kindergarten, always on time with just a little hug before she headed into the room." This particular day, the mother and daughter were laughing and Charmin said that her daughter "was still giggling as she came through the door. I felt like the bad kid, too, when I got those 'teacher eyes' from [teacher] and then [she] said what she did." She said she was "hurt" and "humiliated" by what she felt was a "correction." She continued:

I know teacher's have bad days, too, bad mornings, I lived with one, I know they are people, too, but sometimes quick reactions can do a lot of damage. Luckily, because of my background, I didn't take it too personally. I mean, it is gonna take more than a strong word and a dirty look to keep me away from the school.

Interview responses also indicated that parent volunteers and those active in parent leadership organizations like the PTA could exhibit attitudes and behaviors that either encouraged or discouraged parent involvement. PTA leader and parent Lipton stated, "As a PTA officer, I do try to be present at the school about 85% of the time and I try to be accessible to parents and teachers." However, the presence of PTA volunteers in the school could be

detrimental to parent-school relationships if the volunteers created an atmosphere like the one described by Charmin:

I sometimes avoid interaction with the PTA parents because I hear them in the lobby either before, during, or after school. You have these little cliques of parents and it seems almost like high school and it is almost like high school...you know where people get together and are all-exclusive.

Teachers, like Rooster, shared similar stories of immature parent behaviors that she witnessed:

It has very much happened that I have had parents try to manipulate things. At my last school, the PTA board gave a spirit award for the best behaved newbie. It became a very bad situation with many of the moms looking for ways to weasel their way into winning. They did not like to lose, a lot of them didn't, and it turned ugly. This was the first experience many moms had with parent involvement.

Poor parent conduct reflected badly on the school and could keep parents from participation in school events. Holiday taught 5 years after returning to school to complete her education degree, served 10+ years as a Title I assistant and was an active PTA volunteer throughout her two daughters' school years. She described the extent of the damage that PTA parents' unruliness could cause.

Now, there was one Mom this year and she doesn't like PTA, doesn't believe in it for one reason or another, so she doesn't participate. The kids had a program for the PTA meeting and she just dropped off her child and didn't stay. I think the dad picked her up

and saw some of the program, but the mom, she would have nothing to do with it. She must have gotten burned by PTA sometime in the past.

“I will absolutely not be involved with PTA at all because of who runs our PTA,” explained Hart. “She has hurt so many people by playing favorites with parents.” Another parent at the same school, Vanderbilt, detailed the damage this particular PTA leader had done in regard to counterproductive attitudes toward school leadership. “We have got the same PTA folks back on the board again next year, which is unfortunate because they have decided to be at odds with our principal no matter what.”

Whether led by school administrators, office staff, teachers, or parents, school culture, as indicated in this study, could most definitely either encourage or discourage productive and well-balanced home/school relations.

Perception

Jameson, mom of a preschooler, was involved from the onset, throwing herself into every possible school volunteer opportunity, including PTA leadership. However, she became disenchanted with the level of participation she witnessed thus far:

I was very disappointed that a lot more parents did not get involved with their children’s education. We asked at the beginning of the year and we only had about 6 people volunteer to be room parents. We asked for people we could call on to help with class parties, call on to make copies or put together bulletin boards or something like that.

Hardly anybody responded.

Jameson, like every parent and teacher interviewed, primarily defined parent involvement with examples that included classroom activities. As a teacher, Radcliff’s understanding of volunteerism included “parents giving time at the school for the students.” True, another system

teacher, agreed that parent volunteerism meant “coming into the classroom” or “helping out with any needs in the classroom.” Kara, another teacher, explained, “When I think of parent volunteerism, I think of room moms, moms who come in to help out.” Hopper also defined parent volunteerism as “parents coming in and taking part in the classroom activities.”

While parents and teachers alike repeatedly described parent volunteerism with a narrow view that was almost exclusively restricted to a parent’s physical presence at the school or in the classroom during school hours, the interviewees seemed to have little or no understanding of another term they were asked to respond on, parent governance.

There was an overall lack of knowledge among both parents and teachers regarding the nature of true parent governance. When asked to define what they considered to be parent governance, most interviewees responded that they were unfamiliar with the term, like teacher True who defined it as “I think it is like PTA, when parents who hear about things that are going on in the schools and actually come in and voice their opinions.”

Though parent governance can provide a venue for parents to express their views and offer input, the PTA was not the best example, nor was it a complete illustration of what parent governance can and should be. Some teachers, like Holiday, drew a blank, “Do you mean like a school board member who is a parent or something like that? I am just not familiar with that term.” Only one parent, Breeding, had a clear example of parent governance, stating, “Oh, like a site-based team? That can be a very positive thing, a good way to gain a deeper understanding of the school’s role.” Breeding served on her school’s site based team as the parent member and through her service, she gained insight into parent governance. Teacher Radcliff had an interesting take, “When I think of governance, I think of them kind of being in charge.” As her definition continued, she further explained her opposition, “I think of [parents] trying to run

things ... and I don't like that. I don't like that term." Though parent governance does include parents having an active leading role in community organization, including agency and board membership, it can be a very positive relationship. However, Jameson explained there was also reluctance among parents with regard to participation in parent governance:

It was really hard to even get four people willing to be on the PTA board. I get mad at [parents] when they complain that they don't like what the schools are doing. I tell them to get involved in the meetings or go to the Board of Education and let their voice be heard by the principal or other leaders. Change the things you don't like. If you don't act, nothing is going to change.

Study results indicated that both groups, home and school interviewees, offered restricted acquaintance with both parent volunteerism and parent governance and a continual lack of eager participants.

Communication

The researcher learned through these interview responses that schools communicate their culture regarding family friendliness. The study also illustrated that an understanding of parent volunteerism and parents governance had not been fully communicated to either teachers or parents. Communication is typically key to any successful relationship including that of home and school.

One of the parents interviewed, Sanford, a single mom who worked nights, sleeps days, and depends on extended intergenerational family in her household to help with raising her daughter, reminisced about the way everyone shared troubles and struggles and worked together in her neighborhood growing up in Africa:

I think parents do things very differently here in the U.S. and it makes me angry sometimes because what we did then worked pretty well. Back then we all came together and everybody knew what was going on and whose child was doing what. We sort of thought a child was ours when we were pregnant, but once you gave birth that child belonged to the whole community. We all did our part and we took responsibility. We communicated with one another instead of compartmentalizing so much.

Cooperation through communication appeared to be the key. Once Sanford shared her experience, other parents quickly chimed in and agreed. Like Hart when she quoted the clichéd adage, “Yes, what is it that they say, ‘It takes a village to raise a child?’”

Interviewees shared support for different ways that a “village” could communicate between school and home. Teacher Fitzsimmons spoke about the power of “word of mouth” connections, saying:

We are a smaller school you don’t always have so much of a pool to pull from...we are a pretty tight knit school, more of like a community school and parents talk about what is going on in the neighborhoods, the area, we have parents who talk about what is going on, like in [housing development], word of mouth spreads pretty fast.

Besides word of mouth, many teachers shared with parents through written communication, like Madison, a kindergarten teacher, who connected with parents through a daily journal. “I write to my parents and let them know what happened every day. Instead of wondering what’s going on ... the parents will often let me know in advance of events in the child’s life.”

True communicated things that were happening with her students in a weekly newsletter. She also used the venue for sharing praise for the already involved. “I encourage parents

strongly from the beginning of the year in my newsletters and I let them know not only how important or helpful it is to me, but how helpful it is to their child or other students.”

One parent, Redd, referenced another helpful mode of written communication, the two-way folder:

[My son’s] teacher sends home a folder everyday in his backpack. I have to look inside, sign both graded work that might need extra attention, a nightly reading log, and I also am supposed to initial that I read over his nightly assignments so that I can make sure he completes his homework. I really liked that, but I also adapted it to work both ways. I implemented an agenda for my son and asked that the teacher sign in every day. My son had not only the responsibility of correctly writing down and finishing his nightly assignments, he also had to approach his teacher every day and ask her to sign off that he was turning in complete assignments and behaving well.

Another teacher, Hopper, referenced her use of the same means of home-school communication:

I send a folder home to be signed by parents every night. I want to know that mom and dad know what is going on good or bad earlier than October conferences which can be way too late in some cases. This is the only contact I have with some of my parents and it works pretty well.

Levy was also complimentary of using the two-way folder to “communicate on a daily basis.” Another parent, Sanford, offered her support for this form of communication:

Again, with my work schedule, I have a hard time calling the school sometimes when I need to know what is going on or when I need to share something about [daughter]. I have also had trouble with calling, too, because the office doesn’t like to transfer calls to

the classroom which I understand because I wouldn't really want interruptions at my work either...actually that wouldn't go over very well with my boss.

Hopper continued, "I don't just use it for homework and behavior checks, I also staple in PTA fliers, permission slips, and sometimes classroom needs, too." The two-way folder was one way teachers attempted to initiate responses from home. True expressed a desire for a means of getting more communication and participation from home:

I would like more of not just parent volunteerism but family involvement including home participation, talking, listening, checking homework, progress, needs and assisting from time to time with studying and/or projects. I think that would make a world of difference.

Interview results showed that schools studied took advantage of two-way folders, posting fliers, United States mail, community contacts, phone trees and neighborhood word-of-mouth to communicate opportunities, policies, and guidelines regarding parent involvement. However, there were only a few mentions of the use of more technologically advanced routes such as e-mail, Web sites, and voice mail in any interviews.

Kara, who sent home a newsletter at the beginning of the year, also sent out the messages early that she welcomed parents to "come in and work." She shared all of her contact information at the beginning of the year, including her home phone number and her planning time, and found that "e-mail works really well for contacting parents."

Fitzsimmons also referenced his use of electronic communication by his communication of "classroom needs for the week" through his classroom website. The school system purchased site licenses for every classroom teacher and provided training on how to use the sites to enhance home-school communication.

“I like to go online and check the teacher’s website. I have one teacher who updates it often,” responded Redd. Though one does well with e-communication, another teacher “takes three months” to update. She wondered if other parents who were not able to visit the school as often were always wondering, “What’s going on?”

Arthur responded, “If we don’t know what schools need, we can’t do anything.” This sentiment was echoed by Hart at another parent interview. “If teachers will just tell us what they want, we will do it. I promise you that. I think a lot of times we just aren’t sure where to start.”

Kara sends out classroom supply lists to “let people know that they can donate certain items for students in need.” Leeper has created a “feedback form” asking parents to “give input as to what type of involvement they prefer.” She stated that she “tries to be sympathetic to the working,” parents, being one herself, by including “choices that will hopefully work for everyone.”

Sometimes, parents spoke of experiences with teachers who asked for help but did not accept their responses, leaving one parents “confused and frustrated.” Charmin, for example, filled out and returned her daughter’s “volunteer checklist” but was never contacted by the teacher. She would like for teachers to “ask for help and really mean it” and “most of all communicate needs and then help parents connect and assist.”

Jameson was also bothered by her son’s fourth grade teacher who sent out a letter indicating that she needed help but did not make contact until almost the end of the school year and only then because Jameson called her. “All she had to do was say the word but she never contacted me.”

In another instance, parent Shears said, “I didn’t get any information. I didn’t get anything, not a reading log, PTA info, not any communication until the school year was almost over.” Though she, too, said she knows teachers are very busy, she reminded that “parents are busier than ever. A lot of us are single, working parents and it doesn’t get much busier than that.”

In Madison’s memory of her most successful year with parents, she detailed the necessity and beauty of communicating an early understanding of needs and parents roles in meeting them:

Probably the year I looped was my best parent involvement situation because I knew the parents for two years. They seemed more comfortable immediately.

The second year I had more volunteers than ever because they talked to each other and a bunch of them knew how things went in my classroom. We were able to retain the relationship established the first year so we were already on a very cordial first name basis. I did not have to direct the parents: they knew what to do when they came in.

Some parents reported failed attempts at connecting with their child’s classroom teacher. Jameson, who called communication a “big, big key” to student success, ranked failed communication with her now-fourth grader’s classroom teachers as the worst experience she had with parent involvement. “There are times when I have written a note on Monday and checked daily for a response, something, anything, a note back, a call, but nothing. I ended up going in to see the teacher.” She also had teachers respond by giving a verbal message to the student to return to the parent. Though she knows they are busy, she would prefer they jot down a quick note or ask the student to write it down. She craved “constant communication between parent and teacher, hopefully remarking, “There’s got to be a better way.”

Lipton described her realization that, as PTA president, though she was using numerous routes of communications to get the word out regarding upcoming events, an experience with a special population in her school spotlighted an area of need that she had not before realized:

I don't know what our percentage of Spanish speaking parents we have, but there are more and more of them. I do think that those parents don't feel comfortable because of the language barrier. I always saw one mom who was Hispanic and she walked up to pick up her child and I tried to talk to her but I never was sure whether I got the word out to her, that she understood I was inviting her to the PTA meeting.

Rooster lauded the importance of sharing family involvement opportunities with parents noting, "sometimes you will have an event and there is poor participation, but sometimes that is just because the word didn't get out because of who was coordinating it." Whether reaching ELL parents, working parents, tech-savvy or illiterate parents, schools must constantly seek new and better ways to connect with student homes.

Insight

Teachers insightfully shared reasons they had tighter expectations for parent involvement in their classrooms. Parent Duncan offered insight from her career in teaching, confessing, "I was a bit of a control freak about [parents] I invited into my classroom and what I allowed them to do. I wouldn't just relinquish any responsibility to the hands of parents." Teacher Kara commented that she too sought to control parental involvement in the classroom. However, she shared further explanation:

I am very selective about what I let parents do in the room. I don't let them check papers. I keep students information private. I like for them to help with parties or

go on field trip or they can get trained to use the teachers' work center at central office.

Teacher Byrd offered the following reasoning for her policies:

My first year here, I had a parent who came in to work with the kids. I never let her see my grade book because she would go out of the classroom into the community and report on her observations on student ability and performance like "this child can't read" or "this child did or didn't do this."

Hopper also does not care for parents who "talk about kids' abilities and grades" after they have worked in the classroom. Radcliff described a similar situation she experienced "on more than one occasion, in more than one classroom year" with parents who shared observations about students in the classroom with other parents. She had "no patience with that sort of indiscretion" because she felt it "doesn't help anybody". She quickly ended the classroom volunteer relationship if she discovered a parent "talking in the parking lot. I don't ask them to come back. I will call them and say I really don't need the help because I just can't have [breach of privacy by parents]." She humorously remarked, "maybe it should sort of be like Vegas, you know, 'What happens in the classroom, stays in the classroom! [laughs]'" Teachers most definitely felt relationships with parents could be enhanced if parents could gain a broader insight of the teaching profession.

Fitzsimmons had experienced parents from what he labeled as "both ends of the spectrum." Because his school was designated a signature school, it began accepting transfers and tuition students, including those from the three non-Title I schools in the system. "We didn't used to have parents come in much at all"; however, he now sees changes in the level of input.

There was this one mom who was here today and I mean she has to have a comment about everything. I think she means well but she is always questioning me, “Why do they do it this way?” or “Why do they do it that way?” and comparing approaches and techniques with the other schools. I would like for there to be some sort of training offered where parents could get an oversight of some of our programs and practices.

Teachers interviewed saw value in bolstering coaching for parents, giving them insight not only into educational programs and practices but also into classroom policies and guidelines. Levy explained her classroom guidelines, “If parents will just tell me that they are coming in, anybody is welcome. I just have to be able to prepare accordingly.” She furthered her defense by saying, “I think most teachers are flexible creatures, but you’ve gotta know that we are not just winging it, flying by the seat of our pants every day, we put time and energy into making careful plans for every minute of every school day.”

Rooster, too, would like for parents to know the heart of most educators.

We’ve all had those parents who think that teachers that are just here to collect a paycheck, but they need to look around and know that for the most there are those who think part, this job is not about that, this job is about giving all you have ever got to give.

“I have a box for the parent volunteers” that they can “check as soon as they arrive,” explained Madison. “If there is nothing in the box, there is a list of students who can benefit from one-on-one reading assistance. They go straight down the list to the next name.” Madison said this system worked very well because the parents know what to do and can begin working on the projects at hand no matter what time of day they arrive. “I sort of planned for the unexpected

parent, because if they are here to help, I wanna make the best of that because the truth is, I need them.”

In Byrd’s “first day packet” for parents, she let them know that they were welcome to come in anytime:

I highlight my specific need for help from 8:30-11 am every morning when we do literacy centers, but I will also gladly find something for them if they come at another time like die-cuts or copying, no matter when they come, if I just have notice and can plan.

Lipton understood teachers requesting a “heads up” when parents were planning to come into the room so they could “make plans to include them in the activities.” She added that, sometimes ,it can be a problem when parents volunteer in their child’s classroom. But, she knew that “it depends on the kids, too” so it could not always be ruled out as a good thing “across the board.” She noted, “My girls will run up, kiss me, and get back to work, but that is not the case with some. There are some who won’t get off the parent and they never get back to the lesson at hand.”

A couple of the moms, Charmin and Vanderbilt, said they felt “shunned” from involvement in their children’s classroom and they “don’t understand why.” Though they were not welcome in the room where their children were students, they “are helping every other teacher on both sides of the floor, it makes you wonder,” said Vanderbilt. Some parents who were discouraged from participation in their child’s classroom might not see the bigger picture, that their interaction with their own child disrupts learning and focus in the classroom.

Hopper indicated it would be beneficial if parents saw firsthand the average school day challenges:

I think that if parents were just coming in more and seeing and experiencing more of what we go through here every day, seeing the things we see and finding out what is really going on here in the classroom and at school in general, that would help.

She detailed a few of the growing demands placed on today's teachers. "With standards in curriculum, testing, No Child Left Behind, and so many other things that [teachers] are expected to carry out in the classroom, the responsibilities get tougher."

Another teacher, Rooster staunchly argued that "the perfect parent-school relationship" could be achieved when parents realized that:

Teachers are doing their damndest to teach kids and not just walking out of [the school] at 3:30 every day and counting days til summer break. [Teachers] come in early, stay late, and take work home regularly working well over the 40 hour week.

Arthur gratefully expressed her view of what she called "supremely successful parent-teacher school efforts" at her child's school. She gained insight from her years as an educator, which have given her greater appreciation for flourishing home-school relations:

I am really happy with the PTA and they seem really connected so much that teachers seem comfortable to sort of funnel requests through us. It has to take a little of the load off of them to know we are there for them. The PTA gathers lists of children who might need food or other things throughout the year and we were able to set aside a little emergency fund to make sure that we have that nice conduit to make things happen. I taught for five years before I had children and I know that teachers have got more than enough to worry with aside from making sure their student's basic needs are met.

Two parents interviewed, Arthur and Duncan, had unique insight into the classroom as they were certified teachers themselves who had left professional life for full-time motherhood. Two other parents made decisions, after serving a great deal of time in the schools, to further their education and seek employment in the public education arena. Hart, who also was a trained substitute, generally worked a minimum of 2 days weekly at her children's campus. She applied for permanent support staff positions at various schools in the system since she studied for and passed her Praxis exam for paraprofessionals. "I just love being in the classroom and with the students. I subbed for one teacher for two weeks straight this year after she had surgery and it was wonderful." She expressed further interest in the possibility of some day applying to college:

I might just do it one day. The more I am here, the more I would love to give it a try. There are a lot of great teachers here and they make you wanna do something really important, too. You never know. For now, I am just really happy to be helping them out.

Lipton just completed her first year at a local university after a nine-year break:

I was a business major before I had the girls, but when they came along I left a work and school. I was the general manager at [local restaurant] and had my most of my core classes out of the way and had started work in my major.

After the extreme exposure to public education through being a hands-on advocate for her special needs child, a Girl Scout and Brownie troop leader, a three-time PTA president and a very devoted mom, Lipton heard what she described as "a calling." She applied for readmission and returned to a local university's college of education, specifically in elementary and early childhood education. In the period before her interview, she made the Dean's list and carried a 4.0:

I believe I am headed in the right direction. I can't get enough of [child's school], but it is not just here, I have done observations at other schools this semester and I cannot wait to jump into a classroom of my own. There are so many great teachers here and I wanna be one of them. I know it is going to be tough. I see what the good ones go through. I just hope I have some parents who wanna help me out, too, because you need all the support you can get.

Hopper told how her volunteerism had changed the course of her life; "it was being there [volunteering in the school] and seeing what was going on and what still needed to be done that made me wanna go back to school and become a certified teacher."

Appreciation

When parents give of their time, talents, and resources for the good of not only their own child but also for the good of the classroom, school, and community, they deserve thanks. Some parents interviewed spoke of the satisfaction they felt when the school recognized their efforts. Vanderbilt recollected, "[teacher] was extremely grateful. She thanked us over and over. It was a good experience and it gave us a sense of accomplishment, too."

The teachers interviewed applauded numerous efforts of "parent involvement," often noting the PTA or events they had witnessed or experienced. Byrd raised her cup to honor "the few, brave, wonderful ladies that we have now. I just wish we had more, more, more just like 'em."

Levy, too, took the opportunity to give proper credit to the deserving volunteers of her school:

We have a great core group of PTA parents who are committed year after year.

They really share the load and do a really good job of bridging gaps and bringing

in new people. Our PTA in general has at least doubled in the last five years and I think that kind of growth says they are really doing something right.

Holiday bragged:

The parents at [school name] help make us the very best school. They do so much like at field day, we didn't do anything but play and have fun with the kids. We are always so focused on the tasks at hand, but for that day, we just relaxed and enjoyed time with the students. PTA has done so much, they funded online AR (Accelerated Reading) and then there's the Spring Fling and Fall Bazaar and they do those events every year....they are wonderful, just wonderful.

Fitzsimmons fondly remembered a tremendous first year of teaching when he recognized how much parents could really mean to a teacher:

When I taught at [elementary school in another system] I had a mom who worked for an employment agency so she had a bunch of community connections. She would call around and get professionals to come in and volunteer with different activities. It was great and I really realized then how much parents can offer. Parents offer a wealth of resources and their efforts really start to make things happen for the kids. Sometimes you just can't thank them enough.

True was thrilled to have some volunteers to thank:

I have had by far had the most helpful group ever. I just spent yesterday writing thank you notes. This is the first year I have ever had a homeroom mom and I have actually had three mothers this year who have done absolutely wonderful things.

Teachers and parents both valued expressions of appreciation for their respective efforts.

Hart who served not only as a parent volunteer but as a system substitute seemed to feed on praise from the students she encountered while working in the school. “Sometimes you feel like a superstar walking through the cafeteria. I went in the other day and they were like ‘Miss [name]! Miss [name]!’ and it’s almost like superstar status in the lunchroom. I love it.” True added, “I also then try to recognize those who volunteer in various ways throughout the year either by a note or a blurb in my newsletter or something like that.” She added:

I want to let other parents know what is happening...I don’t ever want to recognize so much in front of other students so that those who have no one don’t feel further isolated, but I want to communicate to the parents my appreciation and encouragement for their participation.

Some parents expressed that they sometimes felt undervalued and that teachers did not appreciate their efforts. Adams explained of her volunteer experience:

I guess when I kept asking, [teacher] came up with something for me to do for her without actually coming into the classroom. I came in at drop-off 2-3 mornings a week and asked what I could do to help and she would give me something to cut out or copy or sort or staple. Most of the time, she would just hand it to me quickly and turn away. It would have been fine if she had asked nicely instead of just, “Here it is, do it”, that kind of attitude. Just a little niceness would have been ok.

Adams added that, while expressions of gratitude are often “few and far between,” she said, “It would have been nice to hear ‘please’ or even ‘thank you’ once in a while.”

True was obliged to applaud the most active parents at her school, “I also would like to see more parents involved in PTA so that the few doing it won’t be abused. The few we have are amazing and wonderful and we are fortunate, so fortunate to have them.”She acknowledged that

deficient demonstrations of thanks can wound parent volunteers. Some parents noted their efforts were not only sometimes scarcely appreciated or unnoticed but also exploited.

Lipton expressed that teachers could unknowingly take advantage of a parent's willingness to serve:

I know that sometimes comments are made. I don't think they are intentionally made, but comments have been made before when I do say, "No" that I cannot take care of a teacher request. It is almost like they guilt me, so I try really hard not to do that to other parents. I try to only say no to things I really cannot do.

Breeding also spoke of her knowledge of the reality of teachers exploiting a parent's service, "It does happen. In a perfect world, you don't get taken advantage of, because there is a mutual respect between the teacher and parent each understanding the other's sacrifice."

Shears was not only parent of two children, but was also the aunt of a student at her daughter's elementary school. Shears' mother had custody of the boy but the teachers repeatedly called on Shears to assist in their classrooms and with various issues regarding her nephew:

I know my nephew and he is just wild, full-blown ADHD, constantly disrupting or getting into something that he shouldn't. "If we have any problems, can we call you?" they have asked me over and over again. Whenever he gets into trouble, too, they are calling me over there, never my mom or my sister, just because they know I will come. I care about him, but sometimes I feel a little abused. I wanna help. I wanna be there. He is family after all. I know they just need someone to respond, I just wish there were some other resources because we are all just doing our best... I mean the teachers, too.

Teachers, too, expressed a lack for positive recognition from the parents of the students they teach. Radcliff noted that she would “welcome a little more thanks”. Byrd described the frequency of receiving expressions of appreciation from student families as “not too often” and “mostly during teacher appreciation week when the PTA asks families and students to draw pictures, write little notes, that kind of thing.”

She also noted, “the ones (students) that drain me most, the neediest ones, the ones who are struggling academically and socially (laughs softly), are rarely the ones whose parents write the thank you notes and send in treat bags on special days.”

Commitment

Many teachers shared disappointments they experienced with inconsistent and undependable parent involvement. Hopper saw parents who were committed to participate come and go. “You have got the very few who almost live here and come in about every school day to some of the teachers and then there are the parents that never come in here and have absolutely no idea what is going on.”

Rooster had just been through a special year end event, where she experienced mixed emotions in finally making contact with a parent she tried to speak with or meet all year long. Though she made repeated attempts and invitation, this person was one of two parents she could not “get to come to anything. I have made calls, sent notes and made a home visit, but have not made successful contact all year.” A frustrated Rooster continued:

Their kids are not bad kids and they are both A/B students. Today was Awards Day and finally one of the two showed up. I was somewhat glad to see her at that point, but part of me was sad, too. She looked at me when I came up to her and she had no idea who I was and that breaks my heart because I have had her child

all year long. The other didn't show up again. I just wanna wring their necks sometimes, but I know I have to accept it. I can't change it.

In describing the changes in participation she experienced from one year to the next, Madison reported, "One year you have a lot of parents who show up and then one year you won't. It just depends on the class." Hart spoke of one teacher who admitted that she had given up on scheduling parents as guest readers. Hart sympathized with teachers and offered, "most teachers are too scared to depend on parents, so they just don't ask anymore."

Rooster, too, detailed what she dubbed "the ebb and flow of parent involvement." She found it a challenge to leave things for parents to do annually because "you never know what you are going to get, so it is easier to just go ahead and do it."

Levy described how "unpredictability" and repeated disappointments led her to adopt a sort of self-sufficiency that could be interpreted as prohibitive to parents:

In terms of parent involvement, I found out early on that there are major inconsistencies from class to class, year to year, and you just can't count on it.

You might have a really good year with great help, but that is the rare one. I don't even depend on having room moms to help with parties anymore, I just plan that stuff and do it myself. It is easier than trying to get it all together, contact everybody, delegate it, and then end up down to the wire and somebody not show up with what you need. I'd rather take care of that sort of thing on my own. I don't mean to turn parents off, I just think it is better to pick up the slack and then engage them in some other way that won't be too detrimental if that don't follow through.

Both groups conveyed their desire for more dedication from parents to take a more active part in their children's education. Rooster said, "In the perfect world, parents would realize their responsibility and know that it is not all on the teachers. There are those who think it is all our responsibility and they [parents] take none." Kara explained, "I haven't had anyone willing to do much for me lately. It's hard these days because [parents] all work. There's no time to help out." Further, Madison observed, "The numbers [of parent volunteers] seem to have declined in the last few years. More parents are working, in fact most are."

Byrd evidenced a recent PTA meeting that showed a marked drop in attendance. "I think the ideal that we would have lots of parents willing to come in on a regular basis and help wherever needed. I just wish we had more. We had more teachers than parents there and that is hard."

Fitzsimmons was "frustrated" with families who "have the time to help, but just don't." He called it "ridiculous" that there were "parents who sit at home all day and draw a check and we never see them. There are legitimate problems sometimes, but sometimes it is selfishness and laziness, plain and simple."

Hart said, "If everybody just did a little something, it wouldn't be so hard on the ones that do. It is a problem at our school, too, with homeroom moms. We just literally have a handful that show up."

Fitzsimmons added:

We do a family involvement activity here once a month and there are tons of ways parents can help, lots of opportunities, that helps when there is constantly something going on that parents can be a part of. I just wish that more would respond.

“At our school, I do everything from top to bottom. My schedule is overwhelming at times,” remarked Hart, seeing the rewards that schools could reap when parents were truly dedicated. “I mean there are no limits to what we can do. There is always a list of things that we can do at our school, so we can always use more moms to do them,” she continued.

True expressed concern not only about waning participation but also for those who were involved and quite possibly overwhelmed:

I think the few parents who are involved really effectively do all they can to fill in the gaps for the parents we never see or hear from. Unfortunately, when those involved parents are carrying a huge load of disproportionate responsibility, they run the risk of burning out quickly which is more than unfortunate. It seems like the very few who do step up do so much more than I can imagine they have time for, but often it is only for one year because they are so frazzled.

Holiday added,

I think it means so much to the kids when parents come in ...they see where their parents spend their time. The kids know that and if the parents are involved, the kids feel like school is important to their parents and they are important to their parents and that is good for everybody.

Lipton shared similar restructuring on how she delegated responsibilities for PTA: I delegate things only to people I know I can depend on. There are a few jobs, like Box Tops for Education that I will give to anyone who says they'll do it. If they do it, they do it and if it doesn't get done, that's fine, too. That sort of responsibility is a good test to see if the parent follows through. If not, we will know not to use that person for a bigger thing next year. We just can't risk it when

things have to get done. It is better to pile a few more things on my load and know it will be taken care of.

Some of the more active parents interviewed shared emotional experiences with regard to their personal commitment to stay involved. Hart shared some of the struggles that she faced staying in touch with the age span of her three children:

My oldest never even acknowledges me when I am at school, the middle is ok, but the youngest is right on top of me, she feels the need for special attention from me so I have the whole spectrum covered and being present in their classrooms sometimes can be difficult. I work hard to be there every day possible.

Vanderbilt, who worked nights, still made a concerted effort to “be there every morning when I get off just to see if anybody needs anything” even though she also remarked that her son’s current teacher “would almost push us out of the room and give us busy work.”

Another mom, Charmin, said she was “sad” when she felt “that [teacher] didn’t need me this year.” She battled feeling displaced and trying to rediscover “her role” as a mom and a parent volunteer. “Finally, I accepted it. I thought as long as my child is doing ok, I am ok with it.” Charmin regrouped and headed back to the teacher with whom she had been so involved the prior year:

I just figured [teacher A] could use my help if [teacher B] did not want me, so I visit her at least three mornings and week and do whatever she needs. I just said to myself, “Hey! You want to be here helping and this is helping.” It might not be in [child]’s room, but it is helping out!

Motivations

Interviewees participated in volunteer opportunities at their child(ren)'s school in varying degrees. Some parents and teachers noted that parents could be motivated toward involvement to fill gaps in their personal educational experiences.

Hart, who first became a mother at only 15, was the youngest parent interviewed. Extremely volunteer-oriented, she boasted, "other than a day one of my kids were out sick, I haven't been absent myself a day in years." It was only 6 years since Hart had earned a GED at 19, not long after the birth of her third child. She observed that she "felt uncomfortable at first" coming into the school because she "didn't remember much about my parents coming into the school." She further described that feeling, "I wondered if I was getting in the way or bothering anybody, but the more I was there, the more comfortable I got. I saw it didn't bother [school staff] and they really wanted me there."

Teacher Kara repeatedly observed parents' hesitation in returning to school as parents, "A lot had bad experiences as children with school and you can almost see a skeptical look in their eyes as they walk through."

Madison also noted parents who came into the school when their own school experience had not been so successful. However, she made a concerted effort to "try to make it pleasant because coming back to school is not the most comfortable thing for everyone." She created comfort zones for involvement with these parents, "I've had parents who couldn't read, but I would have them come in and cut out and color classroom materials for me."

Byrd also had the experience of dealing with a parent volunteer who was not literate: When she told me she couldn't read, I almost lost it. She was willing to help, but didn't know how. I realized then that notes home and newsletters might as well

have been in a foreign language or not even sent home at all unless her child was supposed to be the translator, but then he was only in first grade and was just learning to read himself. This mom wanted to be a part of her child's educational experience which was obviously an area where she had lacked herself.

Sanford revealed her perspective of coming from another place where her education was devalued because of the norms for gender roles in her native country:

I am from another culture and because I am female and I had all these brothers, my education was not really important to my family. My mother wasn't around and my father wasn't keen on me going to school. There was a notion that if you were a woman, you wouldn't go to school. Your place was in the kitchen and raising kids. While I think taking care of your family is important, I want my daughter to have an education.

Shears admitted that she did what she did as a parent because she wanted to give her children "something I never had." she explained, "I came from a single parent home as well and my mom just didn't have time...that is why I participate more, volunteer more."

Ford gave an account of her experience in a rural West Virginia system:

We were a tiny little school. I don't remember moms ever coming in. It wasn't a bad thing, just a bad time. We were all equally poor families so you didn't really have comparisons to make, we were all in it just the same. I am sure things would have been a lot easier for [students and teachers] if there had been some helpers.

She added that, as a mother, she now wanted "to help out where needed."

Some parents articulated that their involvement echoed behavior modeled by their own parents:

My mom was always at the school. She was the cupcake mom, the party mom, the field day and field trip mom...she did the fun things. I like doing those things, too, and for my kids to know I am here for them. I also like helping with the academic needs, the classroom needs, too.

Breeding's mother was on the school board during her tenure as a student in the system. She explained, "I wanted to be involved, too"; however, her participation differed somewhat, "I have always been active in PTA leadership, but more enjoy plugging in to the little behind the scenes needs."

Jameson's family had a number of challenging time constraints that made involvement difficult. "I was the youngest of eight children with a father who worked days and a mother who worked swing shift in a factory." However, she explained that they "always made an effort" to be part of their children's schooling because they "stressed that education was very important and I want to instill the same in my child."

Many parents were especially motivated to be involved because they wanted visibility, recognition, and optimal consideration and treatment and opportunity for their own child, For example, Lipton admitted:

I have to overdo for teachers so they will want my special needs child. I do it full blown consciously. Teachers want involved parents and you know that if you are really involved they will want your kid because they are getting you with them. Teachers do talk, I have heard them say, "Be careful, you've got that one coming up!"

Duncan had a child with special needs and confessed the same motivations. "I feel like I have to overcompensate especially when it comes to volunteering so teachers will want to have

my child in their class. I really do feel that way and I never thought I would.” She stated from experience that her super involvement would make a difference for her daughter,

When I was teaching and I got my student files at the beginning of the year, I wouldn’t even look at them until I met the kids because I didn’t want a preconceived notion of how they were going to be. Teachers do talk. I have heard it.

Hart observed that when teachers noticed parent participation at school, they could and would give that parent’s child “perks”:

I had a specials teacher in the school and she would send notes home about my oldest child all the time. She knew I was the mom to my younger two kids because I subbed in their classes all the time, but she didn’t put me together with my oldest child. Amazingly, when she put together that he belonged to me and she knew that I was at the school volunteering all the time doing jobs for her and other teachers she knew, his grades came up and the notes stopped coming home, but his behavior hadn’t changed. There is no doubt in my mind that he got special treatment just because he was my child.

Kara reiterated the validity of parents’ beliefs that teachers paid close attention to whom was involved and how they were involved:

I usually base my parent contacts on former teacher’s recommendations. “This is a parent who will be very helpful in the classroom, this one is not. The reputation of the parent most definitely follows the child from classroom to classroom. You know who does what.

Lipton indicated that conversations she overheard colored her motivation for involvement:

I have had parents say things about my [daughter] at PTA meetings and she is special needs, anyway, they would say things not knowing that she is mine. I know one child in particular at [school] that I know I have heard teachers say that they hoped they wouldn't get her. Not my kid...they wouldn't say that where I could hear it. When I am there all the time, I hear things, some things teachers didn't intend for me to hear.

Opportunity

Parents and teachers made remarks regarding the need for opportunities for *all* parents to be involved. Rooster expressed her consideration of working families and the restrictions that created on involvement, "Sometimes it is just because parents are working and I understand that because I walk in those shoes." She revealed her own experiences as a working teacher whose scheduled work days always coincided with those of her two boys who were also in the system. "It's kinda weird sometimes because I realize how few times I have ever been able to see my own kids in their own classrooms and schools."

Sanford managed motherhood with an especially tricky full-time work schedule:

I work nights, 11 to 7, and it seems like things are so hectic in the classroom when I bring her in with the kids all putting their things away and getting homework folders out and starting their morning work. I would like to stick around, but I just head home to bed. I sort of miss out on getting to know her teachers and other parents, but I want [daughter] to know I do care about her schooling. They don't even know me at [school].

Fitzsimmons definitely had needs that parents could meet outside the classroom or school day schedule:

I can use them many times to organize things, but not necessarily show up and that could work for any parent. We need more opportunities and more participation. We have got to find ways to bring parents into their child's school experience. Everything is just rush, rush, rush for families now.

Levy, the mother of a college son and twins who would soon be graduating from high school, understood the pressures of the family calendar:

We have got to purposefully plan ways to be involved that work for everyone. Adding to these opportunities, bringing families together with the school fosters the children's chance to be successful. When we all get together for the kids, I think it makes a tremendous difference.

Time was not the only deficit that prohibited parents in their opportunities for involvement. With tight economic times and, of course, the socioeconomic strains experienced by families in Title I schools, financial constraints must always be considered when offering family engagement options.

"I feel the only way kids can be successful is for their parent to be involved in some way," offered Lipton. She took great pride in the part she played in increasing parent involvement opportunities with the inception of a major schoolwide event that would no longer be cost-prohibitive:

We started a great thing two years ago. We have a free Winter Carnival. Families can come and play games, win prizes, eat together, just spend time together and it doesn't cost a thing. The word has really gotten around and we are seeing double

the attendance we started with which means that this is getting parents to the school that aren't usually here. This sort of thing gets parents here, spending time with their kids in a positive way, giving their kids positive attention. I think that has to help the kids. They know someone cares about their school.

Hopper recognized the need to create opportunities for those parents whose schedules kept them from school day participation:

We probably should be dealing with getting them involved at home more like parents helping with classroom projects. You know how the school used to kind of frown on parents working on things like a science project with their kids? I actually think that can be a pretty good thing anymore because we get pretty desperate to make a connection sometimes.

True compassionately understood the plight of working parents and their inability to come during the school work day and tried to deliver other options:

I would love to have some of the parents who cannot come in to the school to be willing to do things at home like cutouts or that kind of thing. I remember making books on tape for my daughter's class one, reading aloud and taping them and then sending them in for the kids to use in the classroom. That is just the sort of thing that a working mom or dad could do.

Madison also noticed the needs for involvement opportunities for special populations of parents as well:

It's just about making [parents] all feel welcome and extending an olive branch.

Last year, I had a mother who was taking the English for Beginner's class at

[local community center]. She would come in and spend time at the school just to work on her conversational English.

Some of the parents interviewed noted that their opportunities for classroom involvement had declined as their elementary student aged. One parent told of an experience she and another mother had with a teacher who had limited their opportunities:

[Another mom] and I have found the same thing to be true since we got to first grade. In kindergarten, we were always hearing “Please come! Please come!” and I liked being there in the classroom. I felt so much more connected like when the kids came home and said something I knew what they were talking about. I remember at the beginning of the year I tried to wait a couple of weeks until the kids got their schedules going and the teacher had her routine set. When I finally came in to ask what times she needed me I was kind of blown off. After two or three times, I was finally just told, “He is getting older now and needs to be more focused on learning than whether or not mom is here.” I have to admit I was more than a little pissed.

This was one of only two stories shared about early childhood classroom teachers who indicated that, because of age, students no longer “needed” classroom involvement. However, some teachers and parents of older elementary teachers stated that their students might no longer welcome parental presence in the classroom. Thus, there should also be opportunities for parents of older students.

Redd said this was true of her fifth grade son. “I have not actually been to the school to volunteer because lately because of his age, he does not want me there.” She was forced to modify her form of involvement to keep her son happy.

Jameson relayed that this was not always the case:

It means a lot to a student when they think their parents really care about what goes on in school. Kids crave positive attention from their parents, interest from their families, parents knowing what they are all about, even in middle school and high school.

Duncan's memory of older students that she taught also indicated that parent involvement was still needed and wanted even as children grow:

As a middle grades teacher, I found that kids still wanted their parents to be a part of things. The parents started to think differently more than the kids for the most part. It seemed like the parents sort of let go and pulled away at that level because they weren't sure what to do and then kids just started to accept that "this is how it is now" sort of a reverse from the way you would think it would be.

Adams said her mom was "very involved" but this lasted only "up until the sixth grade" because she "probably just didn't know what to do."

Teacher Fitzsimmons added, "By the time the kids get into the 5th grade, it is like they are so old they don't necessarily want their parents there...the age thing." However, he continued, "even if the kids don't think they want their parents there or say they don't want their parents there, it is still a good thing and we should keep finding ways to make it work."

The Greater Good

Teachers and parents conveyed their desire for more opportunities for parents to connect through involvement with students other than their own. Kara revealed an experience she had when two divorced parents both refused to come to any school events because they did not want to see one another. She envisioned a better parent-teacher relationship when parents could see

“the big picture,” when they would “actually show up” and when “the child is the number one priority, that’s why they’re here, not because they have time to kill but because they want to make the school better.”

Shears expressed her dismay over the attitude of parents with whom she volunteered on a field trip:

There was this kid who was special needs and she had hearing aids, her nose was running, and she was kind of dirty...you know, not dressed very well, not very clean and none of the parents wanted that child in their group. It was in kindergarten and we were going to the zoo so it was quite a car trip. I already had three or four kids in my group, but I took her. I just couldn’t believe it. I was like “What? This is a child, people! She is just as important as your kid.” They all need someone just to be looking out for them.”

She further urged parents who could not see beyond their own child’s needs to “grow up!”

Madison also would like to see parents “broaden their scope of interest” to include the betterment of the whole school.” She noted the growing needs among all students. “The kids need someone to listen to them...so many of them don’t have anyone who will listen to them read stories at home. They like that time. Just being pulled out and spending one-on-one time with an adult volunteer is invaluable.”

Hopper also accented the valuable contributions that could be made if and when parents would consider helping every child “I also think that it would be great for kids to be able to see that there are adults who care enough to be here, to take time out to come and help.”

Madison called it “remarkable” when she had parent volunteer who did not have students in the class. She said that “kids aren’t just seeing Susie’s mom coming into help, they see the promise, an adult, a volunteer, caring enough to come in and spend time with them which is something many of them never experience with adults in their own family.”

Holiday added, “I have a Dad who takes his lunch every day and comes in to read aloud to my whole class. For some of these kids, no for a lot of these kids, they haven’t had a man regularly involved in their lives ever. The kids love it when he comes.”

Byrd agreed, “We need more Dads, more men to come in. We need more people period willing to just be here as a role model, an example, volunteers who will serve as a steady presence for kids who don’t have much at home to depend on.”

Madison added:

Kids today need consistent involvement and if they are not getting it from their own moms, and especially from their own dads, it helps so much to have volunteers who will come in daily and weekly to help out, to be there. They don’t need another no-show in their lives.

Some parents, like Vanderbilt, happily noted the fulfillment from experiences helping “other people’s kids” when she shared her best family involvement experience:

I know mine. At the end of the year, our first grade teacher was having trouble getting with the children that didn’t pass their math benchmarks and [another parent’s name] and I worked with them and we had a lot of success. It was great to help [teacher] out and then see that the kids scored well. It was good for everybody.

Jameson told of extended family members who realized that they could help with the needs of others. “We have grandparents who come in pretty often. They still have a lot to offer and they are willing to help out all around. They come in to read with kids, usually not their own grandkid, just kids that need help.”

“We need parents,” said Byrd, “in every classroom. The kids with no one are all around us.”

Shears noticed the growing need and enjoyed helping meet them when she visited the school:

I pay for their lunch [laughs] now seriously I haven't done as much this year, but in years past I have served on PTA as secretary/treasurer, helped with cheerleading, done classroom parties, I do a lot and not just for my kids. It seems like every time I go to the school, kids come up saying, “There's [child]'s mom!” and they wanna sit with me in the lunchroom and everything. They are the kids who don't ever have anyone who can or will come in and I am glad to be there for them. I know a lot of their names and I am glad they feel they have someone there when I come in.

Arthur, too, talked of the joy she experienced when she connected with “the kids who never have anyone come to the parties.” She recently felt “surrounded” by those children at a school-wide celebration at a local park. “I started swinging kids around one at a time and the needy ones were lined up.” She said she knew it was a “simple act” that she did with her own kids “all the time” but as she “looked into each set of little eyes,” she realized that these children “craved the attention.” Because she volunteered in the school throughout the year and participated in a “backpack outreach program providing take home snacks” for kids in need, she

became familiar with a few of the children by name. Unaware of what that meant, she “called a few by name” as she was swinging them around. She could not believe their responses: “How did you remember me?” and “She knows me!” she heard over and over. “They just need to know that someone cares.”

Breeding regularly scheduled efforts to help other students. “I try to go in once a week and volunteer for an hour with a student who needs help with reading.” There are most definitely parents working for the greater good, involved in volunteerism for reasons other than their own child’s well-being.

Duncan expressed that working for the greater good was her “most positive parent involvement experience.” She thoroughly enjoyed “working with the students who are struggling to meet a goal whether it be to finish one book by themselves or learn sight words, working with them throughout the year to see how much progress they’ve made.” She used her own parenting and teaching experiences to reach out to others:

My daughter is special needs so I am constantly learning new things that help her; then I try to apply some of what I have learned with the student I work with because I see some of my daughter in him. I have really been able to help him get through circle time better. It’s been good for both of us I think, putting things into practice and not just with [child].

Many parents, like Ford, made connections with children in the school who had enhanced educational challenges. “I volunteer one day a week with other kids in the class, one is autistic and two are ADHD, so I work with whichever one needs the most help that day.”

Rooster expressed her thanks for:

two parents who come in and work with a very struggling special ed student. They come in one morning or two a week and it really helps. If we had more parents willing to do that kind of thing or just let them know that we really need that kind of thing it would make great difference.

Adams noted:

Working with kids in need is probably the most rewarding thing that I have experienced. I have to say for me I think, being in the classroom connecting with kids that you know aren't getting what they need at home ... that is what I enjoy most. It is great to give them a moment of your time, a hand to hold, a hug, a pat on the back when they show make great efforts. I still see some of those kids I worked with and now it is several years later and they run up to me and give me a hug ... and I can't get enough of that kind of thing.

Yet there were still teachers and students in need. Radcliff observed:

I would love to have a parent to sit with each one of my special needs kids, be it socioeconomic, academic, physical, or emotional issues. The ideal situation would be a partner parent volunteer to mentor them, to foster their experience in the school and help them get all they can while they are here. I would like for all the kids to see that there are higher goals to reach for and that they can go places ... do something in life. I would want our parents who are involved to be a window ... to help us show every kid the world and what is out there for them.

Parents continually expressed their willingness and desire for more opportunities to connect through real, meaningful parent involvement opportunities. Jameson replied:

I'm very involved in the school. I am willing to do whatever is needed, not work in the classroom. I go to the resource center and do die cuts. I may do this for the librarian or other special area teachers because they don't usually have assistants and because it is harder for them to get away. I want teachers to know that if they have needs, they can come to me.

Lipton spoke of efforts in which she was involved that meant a lot to her:

I helped with reading night, math night, but most of all I enjoyed coordinating fundraising efforts for the new playground. We placed jars in each classroom to collect change and we have been making community connections to get the money raised however we could. I spoke to one of the Board of Education members about the situation for about an hour and later they approved funding the project. I felt like I really made a difference for the school in something that would last. I felt really good about finally being successful in doing that.

"Everything I do I do it because of the kids because if it is for the kids, how can you say no?" prompted Hart. "Even if I am working in the school subbing, most days I don't take lunch or the planning period, I use it to help somebody, some part of the school."

She joyfully shared her pride in one particular school wide project:

One thing that I worked on this year, me and somebody else worked on a project to boost our [student] attendance. We worked for like three weeks to get a project together and get it in place and now it is the highlight of the kids. They announce it every Friday. We have a huge bulletin board with turtles on it for each class in the school because turtles are our school mascot. Attendance has gone through the roof and that has been awesome to help make that kind of difference.

Education

Teachers related their lack of preservice education on maximizing parent involvement relationships. Responses indicated that teacher education programs lacked any element of instruction regarding ways to initiate and tend to lucrative family-school associations. Madison reported, “I think [colleges] are doing more to prepare you for teaching in the classroom and the parent stuff you figure out on your own.”

Holiday said her college education prepared her “not well at all” for cultivating connections with parents.

My experiences are from being a parent of two girls and working with their schools and teachers with the PTA, sending in stuff and so forth. I learned mostly from working as a Title I assistant before I had a teaching position ... from working with parents in schools.

She envisioned the kind of training she would like to see:

They should begin a class for education students that prepare them to deal with parents. There are so many things that are important to understand about the dynamics of working with the families as well as the students in order for things to be the best they can be. Teachers just out of school need to be prepared for that.

Fitzsimmons did not feel at all prepared for way to get parents effectively involved. Instead, he noted receiving “on-the-job-training”:

It was just once I got in the classroom and realized there were certain things that you need and you don’t wanna take time away from your instruction. You realize that you need parents to do a lot of stuff, but it is sort of a crapshoot trying to figure out how to get them to do it.

Hopper, too, received little instruction; instead, she said, “I just had to experience it for myself. That was the way I learned ... I guess you could call it the hard way.” Rooster added that everything she practiced in regard to relating to families was “self-taught” because the preservice training she received in her MAT program was “zero to none.” She credited her skills for “rallying” parents to being acquired in her marketing classes while seeking an undergraduate degree:

You look at your neighbors, what your limits are, what your resources are, how you can utilize PTA, classroom volunteers...you have to learn what is kosher to ask for and what is beyond the limit, you know what your boundaries are, but I don't feel like I was prepared for that.

“I think you have to start having those interactions with people and you have to develop how you need to deal with different kinds of parents,” recollected Levy. “As far as schooling, there is nothing that can prepare you for some good old interactions when you are there face-to-face with that parent.”

Only one teacher, True, was able to reference parent involvement training in preservice education. Though not her own, she told of her student teacher's training. “He had a newsletter from the start. I didn't share with him the value of the newsletter for communicating with parents, so I believe he must have learned this from his preservice education.”

Fitzsimmons' comments regarding further education for teachers regarding parent involvement reflected a tone of bitterness:

We [the teachers] are about to begin Ruby Payne poverty training again. My problem is that we are getting educated to be sympathetic instead of educating

them [the parents] to make changes to the way they think and act so that they can get out of the cycle.

Instead of more training for teachers, he suggested training parents instead. “I would like for the parents to learn how to be role models and for the ones that come in to know how to be an example to all the kids showing them how they can do better.”

Teachers, like Byrd, expressed support for the idea of educating parents on authentic and necessary means of parent involvement:

I also think parent training would be helpful teaching parents how to help and how to foster learning. I think this would be best offered at the school because it is in their community. I think if we could encourage parents to come in at the beginning of the year . . . and it helps to offer food, that always helps bring people in, teach parents how to help teachers . . . communicate that from the start.

At least one teacher, Fitzsimmons, credited his principal with offering some level of involvement training:

The parents that show up, [principal] does a great job explaining to parents what is going on here. He helps them not only understand educational programs, but the how and why and this helps them feel a part of things. Once they understand more, they can share more and become more of a piece of the puzzle . . . helping everything to fit together.

Kara said it would be great to “provide some sort of classes in which parents can learn how to help their child with homework” because “it is badly needed” and “some parents are not very comfortable helping kids with school assignments.” She explained that it was important to present that information in the right way. She applauded a new math series that her school was

using that offered teaching papers with every lesson, broken down in order for parents to guide their students at home even if they had little or no skill. She had a poor experience with parent involvement materials provided in the school's last textbook series when teachers sent home parent involvement papers that she called "awful" and that many parents found to be "difficult, if not impossible, to follow. I literally had a mother write a note back to me, 'Don't send anymore of those damned papers. I can't do 'em. She was furious because she was embarrassed.'"

Some interviewees, like former teacher turned stay-at-home parent Duncan, introduced the concept of mandating involvement and boldly voted, "I think it would be great if we could make parent volunteerism mandatory. Then maybe you could delegate out the many jobs that need to be done and they would get be done well."

The other teacher-turned-mother, Arthur, seconded the motion:

I have heard of systems where they have requirements for parents, you know like hours of service requirements per school year. That seems like a pretty good idea to me. I just wonder how you deal with the ones who feel forced into in or who are already overworked, under-resourced, you know really can't do anymore than they are already doing.

Jameson said she got "so worked up" believing that parent involvement "should almost be a requirement." She suggested that parents should have to "do so many hours a year," similar to the way high schools "require service hours for the kids to graduate." She said that parents would "grow from what they learn" just like high school students grow from service-learning experiences.

Leeper recalled an idea that her former principal posed, which that she found to be a viable possibility:

I know there was a proposal made last year that we ask parents to volunteer at least 6 hours over the course of a school year in one way or another. I don't think over 10 months time that is too much to ask, 36 minutes a month. What would that break down to less than 10 minutes a week ... that is doable and that could make a big difference.

Teacher True thought out loud as she contemplated the same sort of idea:

I wonder what would happen if you had expectations, guidelines for involvement that went beyond policy. What if we had volunteer hours required for all parents and gave options that could work for all different kinds of schedules? How would you reinforce it? That is an interesting concept if there was a way to enact it.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to construct a theoretical framework explaining the amount and types of involvement teachers desired from parents; to ascertain the types of involvement that school personnel found intrusive or inappropriate; to determine the types of involvement that interested parents; and to discern ways schools can more effectively communicate with, invite, and welcome parents and their involvement in the educational process and workings of the public school setting. The theoretical framework included the following constructs: (a) culture, (b) perception, (c) communication, (d) insight (e) appreciation, (f) commitment, (g) motivations, (h) opportunity, (i) dedication, and (j) the greater good.

Research Questions

Research Question #1

What types of parent involvement occur in schools?

Interview responses in this study indicate evidence of numerous types of parent involvement. The various forms of involvement are categorized under selected constructs from the theoretical framework. This method of classification by construct continues throughout each research question response.

Optimal parent involvement helped teachers continue to stretch limited resources and to maximize student contact and further successes in learning (Swap, 1987). Title I schools, by definition, were schools of limited resources that could most certainly benefit from the stretching

of resources that parent involvement could provide. The number one reason to involve parents, as stated by Swap (1987), was simple; parent involvement benefitted children.

Dedication

Throughout this study, interviewees reviewed numerous areas of parent involvement that were already occurring in the schools from classroom support, provided by physical acts of service that included making copies, sorting materials, scissor cutting or die-cutting of classroom materials, to creation of bulletin boards to student supervision and management during field trips to organization or execution of school wide events, including, but not limited to, fundraising efforts and hands-on student assistance from classrooms to lunchrooms, often including the shadowing of or educational assistance provided to students with special needs. Often these “special needs” were not necessarily students who fell categorically under areas defined by special education programs but students who came from backgrounds of need, which might include little or no parent involvement of the student family both at school and at home.

Twelve of the 13 parents interviewed reported participation in multiple modes of involvement, including one single working mother on a night shift. One mother was single and working full time; another single mother was a full-time college student; and another worked part time as a system substitute but had successfully taken her paraprofessional exam in order to seek full-time employment within the school system. One married mother worked part time. The remaining six parents interviewed were stay-at-home married mothers. Though acquiring a diverse group of interviewees was desired, the three fathers on the potential contact list declined to participate. One said he “had too many things on his plate” and the remaining two did not respond to messages.

Of the 12 “involved” parents interviewed, seven referenced their frequency of school visits weekly, using the following terms: two used the phrase “every day” and the remaining described their visits as occurring “almost every day,” “every morning,” “daily,” “several times a week,” “every week”, or “2-3 times a week.”

Communication

Only one parent, Sanford, offered no examples of her own personal involvement activities. Sanford was a single-working mother on a full-time night shift schedule, a definite barrier to involvement. She described her experience in coming in daily after drop-off and lingering at the school but discontinued this practice when she “didn’t know what to do.” She also had additional barriers produced by her personal background. Sanford grew up in Liberia in a family of brothers, with parents who reflected the cultural norms in thinking a woman’s “place” was “at home” and “in the kitchen” and not in school. Though she spoke and understood English, she had a thick accent and sometimes spoke in broken English, which, coupled with her cultural background, inhibited her communication with school personnel and other parents. This combination of factors might have contributed to her very limited involvement. None of Sanford’s barriers for involvement fell within those identified by Johnson (1991). Sanford’s responses indicated that she was a very caring parent who desired success for her children. According to Hansen (2006), “Difficulty in communication due to limited education or a language barrier can hinder involvement though this does not indicate a lack of desire of parents to be involved.” (p.159)

Culture

Nine of the parents spoke of their participation in PTA. One of those nine, who was currently serving as the secretary of her school PTA, had become disheartened by a president whom she called “terrible” and an experience that she described as “awful.” She and two other mothers with children on the same campus no longer participated because of the poor leadership by the president and her unwillingness to work with the school’s principal. Parent involvement with PTA on that campus was threatened by the actions and attitudes of only one particular parent. The three parents interviewed from that campus opposed the PTA president and offered kudos to their newly tenured principal, describing him as an approachable problem solver who kept close contact with his parents, teachers and students. One of the parents interviewed, whose older child was a student at the school under the prior principal, called the new principal “refreshing” and a “welcome change,” indicating that the change in leadership helped the school improve the climate for parent involvement.

Many other parents and teachers gave high praise to the PTA and the principal at their schools, with interviewees from one particular campus applauding the diplomatic skills of their principal for building a strong working relationship between the PTA parents and the teachers. This principal was credited with being: a “voice” for the teachers who “listens” to parents, “a great communicator,” an “advocate” for good parent/teacher relations, for “bridging the gap” and “paving a way” and encouraging a successful rapport between home and school. There were also compliments extended to the “friendly” demeanor of the office staff that encouraged healthy home-school relationships, welcoming parent involvement.

Parents from another campus also gave good marks to their PTA for its great communication skills, efforts to serve teachers' needs, and offers of opportunities for parent involvement. One of the interviewees was a two-time PTA president who took a year away from the post but would return as president in the near future. She received compliments from three of the four teachers interviewed from the campus where she served. Two of the parents interviewed were on the same campus during the 2 years she served and gave good reviews of her leadership of the PTA and the positive role it played in bringing parents and teachers together for the good of the school. As president, she devoted sincere effort to ensuring that parents were made aware of parent involvement opportunities and exuded tremendous personal energy to provide hands-on help and to recruit additional parent assistance for teachers. The campus commended its principal, the youngest in terms of service as a system administrator having just completed his 2nd year of service, for his contributions in building strong parent involvement. He was described as making consistent efforts to communicate family involvement activities and opportunities offered at the school as well as an "approachable" presence for both parents and teachers. This was in direct opposition of some of the reflections shared about the principal who preceded him in leadership. Unfortunately, strong criticism was voiced regarding the reception offered to parents and teachers by school staff. Four of the five parents and each of the teachers interviewed readily shared negative commentary about the office staff's general attitude toward staff, student families, and visitors. Though the principal leadership and the PTA had made strides toward improving and growing home-school relationships, the demeanor of the support staff impaired and possibly even negated many of the steps forward.

This study revealed that the site-based system was more closely aligned with the partnership or communal model (Glatter & Woods, 1992) with parents and teachers working

together to meet the needs of the children. Though there were sometimes shortfalls affecting the culture, as noted with the PTA leadership at one school and the office staff at another, the campuses studied were moving in the right direction with regard to requirements set forth by NCLB to increase parent engagement opportunities (NCLB, 2001).

Research Question #2

What are specific types of parent involvement teachers prefer?

Dedication

“Supportive, empowered parents make a teacher’s work easier, not harder” (Botrie, & Wenger, 1992). Teachers in this study shared not only praise of principals for their contributions to setting favorable conditions for a family-friendly school climate and communicating the needs of teachers to parents in an effort to help them serve school needs most effectively, they also paid tribute to the involved parents who had ably served them throughout their professional experience. They repeatedly offered acclaim to individuals and groups (PTA) for their service and contributions referring to them as “amazing,” “dedicated,” “tireless” and “wonderful” servants who offered “community connections” and “a wealth of resources” to make schools “the very best.” They could not offer enough thanks for those efforts.

Appreciation

One [parent support group] that remains an active force today is the PTA. Teachers were especially grateful for PTA efforts in fundraising and organization and execution of school wide events such as field days, bazaars, and festivals. They also were also appreciative of parent attendance and supervision on field trips. All nine teachers interviewed praised PTA regarding

their defining of parent governance. Only one teacher was able to provide another example of parent governance when she offered school board service as her example. NCLB required schools to involve parents through participation in school decision making through parent governance opportunities (NCLB, 2001). In order for the home-school connection to be strengthened and opportunities for student success to be fully realized and embraced, there was clearly a need to inform and educate parent and teachers about the nature of and opportunities for true parent governance.

Culture

Three of the nine deemed their parent involvement guidelines policies as “open door,” with one specifically stating that “anyone is welcome” anytime. Four indicated preferred modes and times of service offered within the school day or classroom. Two indicated clearly defined daily opportunities for classroom involvement and not merely general invitations. Madison’s approach was particularly impressive because she was receptive to parent participation within the classroom at any time of the day. She mapped means of service for parents with a pick-up box always stocked with “To-Dos,” whether it was die-cut orders, sorting, stacking, stapling, scissor-cutting, bulletin board creation or reading with a student. There was never a question regarding the “what” and “how” when a parent wished to come in and offer hands-on help. Five of the nine teachers interviewed made reference to training offered at the teacher-parent resource center located at the central office. The resource center offered parent volunteer training, instructing parents on the proper use of the equipment at the center, which includes a variety of die-cutting machines, a poster printer, PC access to desktop publishing and spreadsheet application, printer, copier, reproducible resource books for a variety of grade levels and subject areas, and an

assortment of consumable resources, like card stock, poster board, and construction paper. The five teachers who referenced the center indicated their encouragement of parents seeking training at the center that would enable them to create many needed classroom materials.

The Greater Good

All nine of the teachers interviewed expressed the great need for parent assistance with special populations of students. Many gave ideas of ways parents could help by assisting with the needs of these special students. Special needs did not specifically refer to special education students but also to students with certain social, psychological or emotional needs as well. Through their presence as mentors, whether through simple guidance or one-on-one and group read-aloud or tutoring sessions, parents served the whole school.

Research Question #3

Are there specific types of parent involvement that teachers deem intrusive or inappropriate?

Culture

There were specific types of parent involvement that teachers deemed intrusive or inappropriate. Seven of the nine teachers interviewed shared reasons why they established boundaries for what they believed to be acceptable terms for parent involvement. Though some of these boundaries were as faintly drawn as one teacher who indicated her need for parents' help with literacy centers at a specified time of the morning, others drew sharper, bolder lines between parents and the classroom. A couple of teachers almost seemed to dare parents to cross their understood lines. For the most part, the parent-teacher relationship was working well, although, at times, it was as if a showdown had been declared, indicated by a small number in

their casual commentary regarding their feelings about parental presence in the classroom during the school day. Parent interviews indicated this was the case in some classrooms with five personal accounts of a teacher shunning a parent's classroom participation. Though the numbers of parents sharing positive experiences with teachers greatly outnumbered those who did not enthusiastically welcome their presence, there were indicators that teachers at times contributed negatively to the school's culture regarding family engagement.

Insight

Involvement or participation referred to the involvement of parents in providing input or being consulted about school affairs or their children's progress without exercising influence (Goldring & Shapira, 1993). In defense of the teachers who shared their guidelines and policies, spoken or unspoken, regarding parent involvement in the classroom during instruction time, there were numerous examples cited by the teachers about why they established policies. Teachers first expressed the necessity for privacy, both legally and ethically, with regard to sharing of student grades, progress, and performance. This necessary regulation could be difficult to enact and enforce when nonschool personnel were present within the classroom with access to guarded and personal student information. Teachers told of experiences with parents who freely shared information regarding student ability and performance with those outside the classroom, sometimes resorting to making hurtful, even damaging, remarks regarding specific students.

Whether they actually experienced such breeches or simply become extremely cautious at the rumor of such parent behaviors, teachers made changes in their modes of operation regarding parents in the classroom in order to best protect and serve their students.

Research Question #4

What type of involvement do parents prefer?

Motivation

If parents believed their involvement could positively affect their children's educational progress, they were more likely to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey, 1997). Though 5 of 13 parents interviewed characterized their own parents as involved in their educational experience, 8 reported coming from backgrounds with little or no parent involvement. Six of those parents came from single parent households. Those interviewed who came from noninvolved backgrounds gave various excuses for why this was true, including: "too into her career"; "don't think many parents came to school then"; "too busy being a single working mom; "four kids" and "three jobs"; and "just didn't have the same home view as me."

However, one explained that, though her parents were not involved because they had six children and worked opposite factory swing shifts, they constantly stressed the importance of education to their children. Though these mothers did not necessarily have positive experiences with their own parents' involvement during their schooling, they exhibited a certain resiliency and a drive to expand opportunities for their own child(ren) .

Parents prefer to be involved at the school if it means greater opportunities for their child. Unabashedly, parents interviewed stated this was the case. They admitted their first motivation for service to the school was to increase the chances for their own student's happiness and success. Two of the mothers interviewed were parents of children with special needs and confessed their desperate need for their child to be accepted, especially by the teacher. According to Lareau (2000), "children can benefit from parent volunteerism due to a parent's access and

interaction in the school setting” (p.136). Of the remaining mothers, five explained that their commitment to school service was based primarily on their need to further their own child(ren)’s educational opportunities whether that was teacher choice, special opportunities, less correction or disciplinary measures, preferred teacher treatment, or better grades. One parent strongly expressed her opposition to teachers giving special preference to the children of more involved parents. She shared her personal experience of when a teacher’s corrective action was suddenly withdrawn; her son’s grades improved when the teacher realized that she was an extremely active parent volunteering almost daily at the school and the boy’s mother. This specific example, along with a number of other parent responses, supported Lareau’s (2000) statement that “these [involved] parents can learn how the school system works and potentially manipulate the system in favor of their children” (p. 126)

The responses from parents interviewed opposed findings that “parents tend to participate in activities that they are interested in ... high interest activities, then move into activities that are not as comfortable, such as reading with individual or small groups of students” (Frutcher, Galletta, & White, 1992, p. 47). Parent after parent expressed a desire to and satisfaction with volunteering to assist students in need, whether it was academic, emotional, psychological, or socioeconomic.

Research Question #5

What types of involvement in schools do parents find distasteful?

Culture

As stated earlier, several parents found the behavior of other parent volunteers to be “distasteful.” They shared accounts of hearing and seeing other parents at the school behaving in

a manner that “exclude[d]” other parents. Two parents, Vanderbilt and Charmin, talked of their school’s PTA president “playing favorites” and Charmin compared the snubbing behavior in which some parents take part to be like “high school.” Another mother shared her disgust with parents on a field trip who were not willing to take a special needs child with their group because of her disheveled appearance. These parents were repulsed by certain parent involvement experiences based on other parents’ behaviors.

Appreciation

Some parents also expressed the hurt and anger they felt when teachers took their volunteerism “for granted.” They told of experiences when teachers “assumed” they were “available” and “piled on” tasks without even a “please” or “thank you.” These parents did not expect an expression of gratitude each time they volunteered their time, but they desired respect and an occasional show of appreciation.

The Greater Good

Parents’ most specific preferences with regard to types of involvement sometimes included what they did not like as well as what they would like. Two parents expressed their dislike in being given “busy work” when they offered their time to assist teachers. Another shared an experience when she was being “pacified” with the assignment of meaningless tasks. While it may be that teachers assign particular tasks to parents who desire involvement to engage them in something they deem nonintrusive, the problem could be a misunderstanding. Hormuth (2005) found one barrier to parent involvement was a lack of agreement between parents and teachers about what involvement embodied. Teachers would find it greatly beneficial to look at the scope of what they offer and define as involvement activities and broaden their scope to

allow greater participation. Coleman and Tabin (1992) stated that “teachers must be more active in permitting parent collaboration” (n.p.).

Though these parents may have initially pursued involvement for the sake of their own child, the vast majority, 12 of 13, also worked for the greater good of the school and its students. Those parents participated in and were greatly gratified by outreach service to other students in need. Those 12 described various means of tending to other student needs, including promoting school wide attendance incentives, shadowing and guiding special needs students, working one-on-one with students to improve literacy or benchmark performance, and simply being a positive, consistent presence. Some words and phrases that parents used to describe such involvement opportunities were: “fulfilling,” “great,” “good for everybody,” “rewarding”, and “awesome.”

Research Question #6

How do teachers communicate parent involvement needs?

Teachers reported various means of communication that they used to communicate parent involvement needs. Seven of the nine spoke of principals and PTAs sharing these needs through “word of mouth” at school wide events. Of course, in order for parents to receive information via this route, they must already be involved through their attendance at such an event.

Each teacher interviewed spoke of written communication sent home with or handed to parents at the beginning of the year that either outlined their specific areas of need for involvement or requested input from parents regarding how they preferred to be involved. Two of the teachers indicated that they solicited parent suggestions and offerings of specific resources they were able or willing to provide. To keep parents continually abreast of parent involvement

needs, four of the teachers interviewed mentioned use of newsletters, two of whom indicated a “weekly” circulation. Two teachers also indicated that their school mailed a newsletter to all student families monthly providing further information regarding school needs and parent opportunities for involvement. One teacher, Madison, spoke of her daily written communication with parents via student journals. Though these modes might share teacher information on various needs with parents, they did not provide a means for parents to respond. Four teachers mentioned their use of the two-way folder sent home either weekly or daily. Epstein (1987) said that conducting effective communication from school-to-home and vice versa was a basic obligation of schools. The two-way folder provides a means for teachers to share daily or weekly communication regarding parent involvement whether through classroom needs, school wide events, sharing of student progress and needs, or opportunities for home study, practice, and projects.

Teachers also reported using electronic means for communication with parents. Electronic communication often provides quick and simple two-way access. Though one system studied funds teachers’ use of and training for use of QUIA websites for every classroom, only two teachers mentioned use of websites for communication of parent involvement needs and to share classroom news, calendar, assignments, or additional learning resources for home. However, Fitzsimmons spoke positively of his responses from use of the site to communicate “Classroom Needs of the Week.” One of the teachers mentioned the gathering of e-mail addresses from student families, which she reported “works really well” for parent-teacher communication.

Research Question #7

How aware are parents of opportunities for involvement?

Though teachers reported positively on their sharing of information regarding parent involvement needs, parents seemed to feel that communication between home and school was an area that needed great improvements.

Communication

NCLB (2001) defined parental involvement as “regular, two-way, meaningful communication” (n.p.). Parents interviewed repeatedly expressed their displeasure or dissatisfaction with communication they received from schools during their student(s)’ academic experience. They said home-school communication was often too late, unclear or nonexistent. Six of the nine parents interviewed indicated their desire for improved home-school communication. Two parents applauded use of e-mail and web sites for communication. However, three parents indicated that these technological tools were not used as often or as effectively as they could be. Two parents shared their need for clarity in teachers’ communication for parent involvement needs, indicating that they were willing to serve if they know how and where to begin.

Opportunity

Hormuth (2005) reported a study by the U.S. Department of Education indicating that positive parent-school contact decreased as children get older. In this study, there were indications from both teachers and parents that parental involvement decreased as students advanced grade levels. There were differences of opinion why this might be the case. Some parents observed changes in their students’ attitude about parental presence at the school and in

the classroom. Two mothers spoke of their student's opposition to their school involvement as they reached upper elementary grades. Two teachers also remarked about their fourth and fifth grade students decreasing need or want of their own parent's presence at school. However, one teacher expressed his belief that, though this was an assumption often made by adults, students continued to desire parental contact at school. One parent, Duncan, who had also spent years prior to motherhood as a middle grades teacher, indicated that she thought students benefited from involvement, even into their junior high years. Additionally, Jameson remarked that, though they were unable to do so because of the size of her family and her parents' work schedule, she longed for her parents to be involved even into high school.

Recommendations

Through this research, personal experiences and education and digestion of the thoughtful, reflective, in-depth, and honest responses shared by the teachers and parents who chose to participate in this study, this researcher could draw specific conclusions. It was exciting to think that it was possible to make positive changes for parents, teachers, schools, and, most importantly, students simply by listening to both sides and using their heartfelt feedback to find a working balance for home-school relations that suits both the educational professionals and the caring parents.

Based on the research, the following conclusions are presented:

- Teachers want to be respected and recognized as true professionals.
- Parent volunteers want to be respected and recognized as caring parents and integral players in school and student success.

- Most teachers and parent volunteers greatly value and want to work for the betterment of both the individual student and the school.
- Most teachers and parent volunteers desire an increase in parent volunteerism.

There are definite actions that can be taken on both sides and on the part of the school as a whole in order to make positive changes through creating healthy and balanced home school roles.

Recommendations for Teachers:

- Effectively, repeatedly, and frequently communicate real, meaningful opportunities for parent involvement that suit many different groups of parents, including, but not limited to: single parents, fathers, grandparents, working parents, mentally or physically disabled parents, socioeconomically or academically challenged parents, ELL parents, parents with young children, and parents of all students regardless of advancing grade levels.
- Create and communicate classroom expectations and guidelines for parent volunteerism, stressing the importance of privacy and respect for student ability and performance.
- Offer multiple modes of two-way communication with parents fully using the most effective new technologies.
- Consistently communicate with parents and follow through with responses and contacts.
- Welcome parent involvement, even if it is only for a prescribed time and activity. Parents are looking for opportunities to keep connected with their child's life and to help their child have the best resources and options for success.
- Create and welcome parent involvement in a variety of modes that can be made accessible and available to all parents. Though the teachers interviewed have a respect for

mothers and fathers, grandparents, single parents, working parents, parents with small children at home, academically challenged parents, ELL parents, and or the parent who had poor experiences with teachers, administrators, and schools in general in the past, they must make constructive and concerted efforts continually to upgrade and expand opportunities for involvement for all student families.

Recommendations for parent volunteers:

- Continue to offer much needed, dependable support and assistance to teachers and schools, especially with regard to needs of students other than their own.
- Respect the privacy of all students by keeping information regarding student ability and performance confidential.
- Adopt a positive, welcoming attitude toward all other parents or parent volunteers.

Recommendations for school administration:

- Create and communicate school wide expectations and guidelines for parent volunteerism and governance, stressing the importance of privacy and respect for student ability and performance.
- Provide high quality training opportunities for families of students that include instruction and resources for at-home academic support and effective means of parent governance and volunteerism.
- Offer multiple modes of two-way communication with parents, fully using the most effective technologies.
- Refine a family-friendly school culture through positive principal leadership, parent governance, parent volunteerism and attitudes and behaviors of school staff.

- Help teachers and parents fully understand and recognize opportunities for parent volunteerism and parent governance.
- Access ready, willing and able parent volunteers to serve the needs of students in need, whether academic, socioeconomic, emotional, physical or psychological, in any classroom in the school. This sort of arrangement satisfies the greater good of the school and respects the wishes of both sides of the home-school relationship.

Recommendations for Further Research

- Interview groups of parents from a number of non-Title I schools to assess attitudes of parents and teachers regarding parent volunteerism and governance, considering that parents in some Title I districts have greater means for supporting their community schools. There may be a tendency for parents in borderline schools that do not qualify for Title I identification to feel taxed by demands if they are expected to “take up the slack” or make needed provisions when necessary to ensure students and teachers have necessary resources.
- Include administrators in the discussion and determine their attitudes toward parent involvement and or parent governance.
- Compare and contrast groups of Title I and non-Title teachers, parents, and administrators and their attitudes toward parent involvement and governance.

Researcher’s Future Plans:

Throughout my research, interviews, assessment, analysis, recommendations, and conclusions, I believe I have evolved as a professional educator and aspiring school leader. I

hope that I will take all that I have learned and continue to grow from this experience being mindful of the passionate pleas and proclamations that I have heard from both sides of the student experience, home and school, parent and teacher. I anticipate future opportunities to initiate many of these recommendations into my own professional practice or to encourage their practice among my colleagues.

As I look forward to having the privilege of working as a school administrator, I also take with me the knowledge that principals have a profound impact on the quality and quantity of parent volunteerism and governance in the schools they serve.

Three interviewees summed up the findings of this study:

Parent Arthur stated:

It all comes down to [the fact that] we are counting on you to educate our children and you are counting on us for some real back up. In the ideal setting we wouldn't be afraid to rely on each other. Parents, teachers, and administrators should come up with a great list of parent volunteer choices with specific ways that all parents can give time to the school.

Fitzsimmons, a teacher, offered:

We should look at things from each other's perspective, the parents and the school...that would help. I guess it would just help for both sides to see things from the other point-of-view, sort of take a walk in each other's shoes. It would be a good thing and really help the kids a lot more in the long run.

Finally, True, another teacher, added:

I have had the most phenomenal parent responses this year and that says something, the best parent involvement and by far the best class of students that I have ever had. It all goes hand in hand.

It does “all go hand in hand,” finding the balance of high quality, effective meaningful offerings of parent volunteerism and governance for all kinds of students’ families, communicated clearly and offered in such a way that teachers, administrators, and school staff can confidently welcome it and depend on it to make public schools fertile soil for student growth.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

East Tennessee State University

INFORMED CONSENT

This Informed Consent will explain about being a subject in research. It is important that you read this material carefully and then decide if you wish to be a volunteer.

PURPOSE: The purpose(s) of this research study is/are as follows: I intend to examine the reasons parents participate in volunteerism and governance in their childrens' schools and what types of volunteerism and governance teachers would like to see from parents.

DURATION: I anticipate that each interview will last approximately 60 minutes.

PROCEDURES: Participants will be interviewed personally by the researcher using the

interview guide in a one on one interview or in a focus group interview. Participants will be also be selected based on recommendations made by knowledgeable individuals. Possible candidates will be contacted initially by phone or email to determine interest in participating in this study. Upon determination of interest, a meeting will be scheduled and the appropriate signatures obtained prior to the interview process. Participants will be free to stop the interview at any time for whatever reason they chose.

AUDIOTAPING: With your permission, I would like to audiotape this interview. Only I will have access to the tape, which I will personally transcribe, removing any identifiers during transcription. The tape will then be erased. Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law and your identity will not be revealed in the final manuscript.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS: There is a risk that the nature of the questions asked might cause the interviewee to feel some discomfort. You are free to decline to answer questions of that nature.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS and/or COMPENSATION: There are potential benefits which may accrue to society some students, schools, and families may benefit from increased knowledge.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS: If you have any questions, problems or research-related medical problems at any time, you may call Kenneth Carleton Lyon at 423-434-0266, or Dr. Eric

Glover at 423-439-7615. You may call an Institutional Review Board coordinator at 423-439-6055 for any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Every attempt will be made to see that my study results are kept confidential. A copy of the records from this study will be stored in personal researchers home in a locked file cabinet for at least 5 years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming me as a subject. Although my rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board, and research related personnel from the ETSU Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis have access to the study records. My records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: The nature demands, risks, and benefits of the project have been explained to me as well as are known and available. I understand what my participation involves. Furthermore, I understand that I can refuse participation or withdraw from the project at any time, without penalty. I have read, or have had read to me, and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A signed copy has been given to me.

My study record will be maintained in strictest confidence according to current legal

requirements and will not be revealed unless required by law or as noted above.

SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER

DATE

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

DATE

SIGNATURE OF WITNESS (if applicable)

DATE

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide for Parents

1. How would you describe your parents' involvement in your education?
2. How do you participate in the education of your children?
3. Describe a successful experience you had working in a school.
4. Describe a negative experience you had working in a school.
5. How does your child's teacher/school communicate volunteerism/governance needs?
6. Have you ever had a volunteer experience in the school in which you felt intrusive?
7. In what ways could your child's teacher/school have welcomed your involvement?
8. Describe the perfect parent/school relationship.

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide for Teachers

1. How did your pre-service education prepare you for parent involvement in schools?
2. What image comes to mind when you hear the term *Parent Volunteerism*? *Parent Governance*?
3. What was the most positive experience you had with parent volunteers in your school?
4. What was the least positive experience you e had with parent volunteers in your school?
5. What is your policy regarding parent volunteerism?
6. How do you communicate that policy and opportunities for parent volunteerism?
7. What is your or your school's greatest strength in the area of parent involvement?
8. What is your or your school's greatest need in the area of parent involvement?
9. Describe the perfect parent/school relationship.

APPENDIX D

School System Administration Permission

JOHNSON CITY SCHOOLS
APPROVAL FORM FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS

REQUESTOR'S NAME Kenneth Carleton Lyon
TITLE OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL Finding the Balance: to what extent are parents expected to be a part of their children's education.

STEP 1: RESEARCH REVIEW OF CURRICULUM DIVISION

We temporarily withhold approval of your proposal until you address the questions we have raised about it in the attached letter. (Include this form with resubmission of your proposal.)

We conditionally approve your proposal and you may proceed with making contact with principal(s) of the appropriate school(s), but it is necessary for you to address the questions we have raised about your proposal in the attached letter.

We approve your proposal. Proceed with obtaining approval of the principal(s) of the appropriate school(s).

[Signature]
Signature, Curriculum Division Reviewer

3/31/08
Date

STEP 2: PRINCIPAL'S EVALUATION

I temporarily withhold approval of your proposed research being conducted in my school for reasons stated in the attached correspondence. (Include this form with the resubmission of your proposal.)

PRINCIPAL #1: _____ DATE: _____

PRINCIPAL #2: _____ DATE: _____

PRINCIPAL #3: _____ DATE: _____

I approve your proposal. Please forward this form to the central office for approval of the director.

PRINCIPAL #1: Carol J. McKie DATE: 3/31/08

PRINCIPAL #2: Michelle O'Hare DATE: 4/1/08

PRINCIPAL #3: [Signature] DATE: 4/1/08

Principal #4: [Signature] DATE: 4/18/08

STEP 3: DIRECTOR'S EVALUATION

I withhold approval of your proposed research being conducted in our schools for the reasons stated in the attached correspondence. I am forwarding a copy of your proposal, a copy of this form, and a copy of our correspondence to the curriculum division reviewer. They will communicate with you further.

I approve your proposal. Proceed with your research according to the conditions agreed upon in the preceding sections of this form and your research proposal.

[Signature]
Signature of Director

4-21-08
Date

NOTE: The signed copy of this form should be returned to the curriculum division for its records. (Reference: Johnson City Board of Education policy 4.200)

VITA

KENNETH CARLETON LYON

Personal Data: Date of Birth: March 13, 1968
 Place of Birth: Johnson City, Tennessee
 Marital Status: Married

Education: Public Schools: Johnson City, Tennessee

 East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee
 Biology, B.S.
 1992

 East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee
 Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, M. Ed.
 2002

 East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee
 Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, Ed. D.
 2008

Professional
Experience: 6th and 7th Grade Science and Social Studies Teacher, Liberty Bell
 and Indian Trail Middle Schools, Johnson City, Tennessee
 1994-2005

 Teacher Trainer, Appalachian Educational Laboratory
 1999-2004

 Technology Coach, Johnson City Schools, Johnson City, Tennessee
 2005-Present

 Adjunct Faculty, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City,
 Tennessee
 2006-Present