Leaving No Family Behind: A Qualitative Case Study of the Perceptions of Parent Involvement in One Low-Income, Urban Middle School

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LEAVING NO FAMILY BEHIND: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN ONE LOW-INCOME, URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL.

Dissertation

by

MOLLY E. MCMAHON

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ABSTRACT

Leaving No Family Behind: A Qualitative Case Study of the Perceptions of Parent Involvement in One Low-Income, Urban Middle School

Molly E. McMahon

Dissertation Director: Dr. Diana Pullin

Parents are the primary educators of their children and the consistent teachers throughout their lives. However, with raised expectations through curriculum state standards and high stakes testing for students, teachers and schools, families are being left behind. A particular turning point in students’ education is during the middle school years when intellectual, character, social and emotional transitions occur and habits are formed. Therefore, this qualitative, single case study uses data sources of interviews, observations and artifacts to determine the appropriate role of parents at the middle school level as perceived by administrators, teachers with administrative duties, teachers and parents. Additionally, this research sought to determine the unique factors that impede more effective partnerships between home and school and analyze the current situation using the sociocultural theory to determine if beliefs and values match the social structures in place at this particular school and provide implications for practice. Findings reveal the parent role is defined by consistent communication between home and school for unified adult expectations. Unique factors impeding parent participation at this level are based on this particular age of the students. Using sociocultural theory, it is evident that the school community culture prevails over individual beliefs and is impeded by two underlying sub cultures of rationalizations and assumptions, which allow participation to remain infrequent. There are
additional overarching issues discussed that go beyond sociocultural theory. Finally, recommendations for practice are made for this particular school and the middle school level.
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To Dr. Patrick McQuillan for his dedication to the value of qualitative research. Promoting the study of such a complex field to be researched with and by the various stakeholders ingrained in educational institutions gives incredible voice and power to those traditionally disempowered.

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To the entire staff, administrator and parent community at the Revere School for welcoming me into the community and allowing me to work alongside the incredible initiatives happening at the school. The thoughtful and candid way in which you all shared your insights and experiences brought more clear and deep understanding of the current home-school situation, but also gave hope for change and increased relationships between staff and parents. You set the bar high for middle schools and all schools in the Roslyn Public Schools!
DEDICATION

At the outset of this research, I was told, “If you scratch the surface of anyone’s dissertation, it is really an autobiography.” When I first heard this statement I could not make the connection to my own research. After all, I do not have a family of my own and especially not a child of middle school age. I also was not raised in a low-income, urban background. I had simply had an incredible experience with involving families in my own classroom on the Southside of Chicago. I felt that if schools improved relations between homes and schools, only then could education’s empowering nature raise student achievement in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

But as I thought more about this statement over the next two hours of this particular class, I experienced an “aha” moment. Despite having gone into a different field, I realized that I had unconsciously begun my career in administration as an attempt to pick up on my father’s life’s work. Both my father and I, although at very different points in our careers, are tirelessly working daily to improve the conditions of the modern family unit. As the executive director of the largest childcare and family non-profit in the state of New York, my father has always worked long hours towards improving the lives of families and children through social services, educational opportunities and enrichment programs. I had always thought I avoided going into his field in order to blaze my own path. However, my father’s strong faith, dedication to service and knowledge that empowering the family unit improves society as a whole has inspired me towards being a leader in education for this same reason. His investment in all families is truly an investment in the society in which my sisters and I will raise our own families. His courage, resilience and work ethic are inarguably now a part of me. I leave my father with this message: “It's okay dad, you can now retire, I’ve got this one.”
Simultaneously my mother’s influence on my life and my viewpoint of the power of family involvement on children’s educations is undoubtedly as influential. In spite of finishing college while I was in elementary school and working full time, I cannot remember a single school event, parent conference, concert, softball or field hockey game in which my mother was not in attendance. She was not only my biggest cheerleader, but also the most influential in making me the strong, independent, and confident women I have had the opportunity to become. Our family was and still is always her number one priority. Her unconditional love for my father, my sisters and their families, and myself, along with the completely selfless outlook she has on life is at the heart of this research. I cannot think of anything she would perceive as more important than finding ways to strengthen family relations and quality education for all.

In addition to my parents as my first teachers, I am fortunate to have two sisters who have made all the difference in my life. They have been my life-long coaches, counselors, and best friends. They have cheered me on through successes and supported me through challenges. Their shadows have never been easy to follow, yet their trailblazing immeasurable to my life. Without each of my sister’s advice, perspective and love, I could not have possibly persevered through this study. Without such an incredible family myself, I am not sure I could have addressed this topic so passionately throughout this study. This research is therefore dedicated to my father Robert, mother Kathleen, and sisters Kerri & Amy.

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CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Purpose

This study’s purpose is to understand the underlying perceptions, values, beliefs and experiences of parents, teachers, and administrators surrounding the role of parents in middle school. The study’s goal is to understand how to create home-school partnerships with the aim of raising student achievement. This research is a qualitative case study in one northeast, low-income, urban middle school in the Roslyn Public School District and relies on: semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators; participant observations of School Parent Council meetings and school events; and analysis of artifacts collected at meetings, school events, and for purposes of home-school communication. With an underlying action research methodology, data will be analyzed through the lens of sociocultural theory to compare values and beliefs of the parent role, with the social structures in place to improve what actually transpires at the school.

Parental involvement in students’ education is critical, especially in communities with educational underachievement (Ferguson, 2005). This study seeks to address the large disparity in the literature, conceptual understanding, and implementation of parent involvement in low-income, urban middle schools. With the current standards-driven environment and high-stakes testing in schools, compounded by globalization and international competition for students to perform, the middle school developmental years have high stakes for both character and intellectual growth. This is a transitional time that has an effect on student motivation in higher education and career success.

Schools must tap into all resources available to engage students and raise levels of achievement in order to close the ever widening “achievement gap” in low-income, urban middle
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schools. One current underutilized reserve is parental involvement. This research intends to understand underlying values, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes and experiences of the parents themselves, alongside those of teachers and administrators in order to partner with families for meaningful participation in education. Home-school relations go beyond parent-teacher conferences, fundraisers and yearly events, to a deeper understanding and relationship between schools and families, to unite for the purpose of student academic and social success (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). This research is based on the premise that low-income, urban middle schools need to develop “partnership models” (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007) with parents to overcome cultural and educational value differences. Through deeper understandings of one another, schools, led by parents, teachers, and administrators can begin to bridge information channels for low-income, urban families to navigate educational systems and help their children succeed in K-12 schooling, higher education, and beyond.

Introduction

According to the 10th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people” (U.S. Const. amend. X). In other words, rights not delegated to the Federal Government, such as education, are automatically granted to the state. Despite this declaration, throughout history, the federal government has played a role in education through spending-clause statutes and Supreme Court decisions regarding the education system of the United States. More recently, since the publication of *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the education system has become the center of political debate in our country with attention from every level of
government. In an effort to create common standards for all children, the federal government has stepped in to “standardize” the education system. It has mandated the largest and most intrusive federal statute on education our country has experienced. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), 2002, not only requires high standards for all students, as mandated through high-stakes testing and statewide curriculum frameworks, but instructs that, in an effort to better reach students, schools must actively involve parents/families at the local school level as children’s primary educators (20 USCA § 6318).

The federal pressure has caused states to adopt similar standards in their education legislation. The Massachusetts General Laws (M.G.L.) reflect similar principles regarding the necessity of finding ways to actively engage parents in the schools. These standards were enhanced to promote student achievement and the ability of schools to reach federal mandates through the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 (M.E.R.A.). In M.G.L. 71 § 59C, “At each public elementary, secondary and independent vocational school in the commonwealth, there shall be a school council, consisting of the school principal, who shall co-chair the council; parents of students attending the school…Said parents shall have parity with professional personnel on the school councils.” This is a large responsibility for parents and the schools respectively, to be considered, and to consider parents an equal authority in determining school-wide objectives and outcomes.

The N.C.L.B. Act, 2001 and M.G.L., with updates through M.E.R.A. (1993), seek to create policy that promotes productive and inclusive parent involvement programs by providing generalized mandates for the involvement and empowerment of parents in schools. However, due to the multi-level leadership that is required to undertake these principles, districts are left to implement policies on their own. School communities are not monitored for compliance, nor are
they awarded monetary compensation to carry out parent involvement initiatives (Epstein, 2005b). Therefore, it is the job of local-level administrations to determine how to define this involvement for their population, specifically, how to implement it within their own community, and how the individual school is to build the capacity to empower parents. Mandates themselves do not make effective partnerships with schools; they must also have the endorsement of local leaders (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Spillane (2005) argues that in order for policy to be effective, the action of local administration is crucial.

For local implementation, educational social science researchers have sought to define positive parental involvement (Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey, 1987), and to outline types or levels of participation, (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, 1995; Hoge, 1997; Manz et al., 2004; Singh, 1995), and to inform local district practice through schools with working models, especially for urban, low-income districts (Epstein, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1992; Jeynes, 2005; Manz et al., 2004). Much of this research has focused on parent involvement at the elementary level (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Davis-Kean, 2005; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Epstein, 1985a, Epstein, 1985b, Epstein, 2005a; Griffith, 1998; Kratzer, 1997; Manz et al., 2004) and a small amount has been done in high schools (Cho & De Castro-Ambrosetti, 2005; Clark, Shreve & Stone, 2004; Dornbush, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts & Fraleigh, 1987). Some research has even attempted to generalize parent involvement at all levels (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Stevenson, Chen & Uttal, 1990). However, the research done solely in middle schools is sparse (Epstein, 1996; Friedlander, 1999; Hoge, 1997; Ramirez, 2004; Singh, 1995). In addition, the existing middle school research is based on practices in elementary schools (Epstein, 1992; Epstein, 1996; Epstein, 2007; Rutherford, 1995) or measures the effectiveness of a particular type of
program (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Epstein, 1995; Friedlaender, 1999; Hoge, 1997; Ramirez, 2004; Sanders, 1999; Singh, 1995). No research done solely in middle schools addresses the viewpoints of parents, teachers and administrations as to their perceived roles and responsibilities in creating home-school partnerships.

The absence of research on this topic is troubling. Middle school is a time of enormous transition, during which it is crucial for students to be motivated to continue to achieve and excel academically. This is especially true for minority children (Stevenson, Chen & Uttal, 1990). The middle school transitional years are essential for social, emotional, and academic growth to prepare students for success in higher education and beyond (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). The early adolescent years are characterized by rapid physical, intellectual and social change. During this time, young adults are discovering themselves, engaging in complex thinking, experimenting with risky behaviors and struggling with self-esteem (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Simultaneously, students in middle school are challenging and preparing themselves with the coursework and study skills that will equip them in their high school courses, all of which can lead to higher education opportunities (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). Finally, the pressure exists for high school tenth graders to pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam, which is the Massachusetts State standardized-testing system, and necessary to graduate from high school. This is significant in middle school since these teachers have three years to prepare students for this exam, whereas high schools have fewer than two years with students. Therefore, this highly stressful transition period from elementary school to high school is essential for students’ futures, and, arguably, for the future good of society. The requirements of parents, teachers and administrators must be addressed in
order for this “power team” (Fullan, 2001) of three to best support such a crucial, but stressful and uncertain time for today’s youth.

Unfortunately today, relationships between schools and homes are strained (Fullan, 2001). Finding a way to best serve students at this pivotal developmental stage in students’ lives, however, is imperative. This research has important implications for both theoretical frameworks and for practical implications at urban middle schools. “Whatever the source of the problem to which inquirers were responding, the shift toward connecting research, policy analysis, evaluation, and/or deconstruction…with action has come to characterize much new-paradigm work, both at the theoretical and the practice and praxis-oriented levels (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 267).

Statement of the Problem

This study intends to address the problem, which still persists, that research regarding how schools and parents can best form partnerships at the middle school level in order to raise student achievement is needed. Many schools have accepted Epstein’s six levels of parent involvement (Epstein, 1995), which are detailed later in the chapter and are established in parent and family research as the six levels at which schools can involve families in a comprehensive program. However, these typologies are too often generally applied from elementary into middle school, and from suburban to urban settings without being tested and researched in the settings themselves. In addition, there is little research on how adults doing the actual work with middle school aged youth perceive their roles or believe best practices would look like within or beyond this conceptual framework in low-income, urban schools. Finally, Epstein’s model is based on “support” in which the parents are expected to maintain and confirm what schools are doing (Brown & Beckett, 2007). However, in low-income, urban districts, families have varied cultural
backgrounds, which challenge schools to more deeply understand family educational beliefs and aspirations in order to involve families in ways that align with personal beliefs and values regarding education (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007). This would allow the school and home to simultaneously complement one another in a “partnership model” approach. This study will attempt to fill some of the gap in research and articulate the needs of parents, teachers, and administrators to work together to provide a united message to youth with the aim of raising student achievement in schools.

*Why Is Parent Involvement In Schools Necessary?*

Research has proven that parent involvement at all levels improves student behavior (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), which also leads to higher levels of student achievement (Davis-Kean, 2005; Dornbush, 1987; Epstein, 1985, 2005; Ferguson, 2005; Hoge, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987; Jeynes, 2005; Manz, 2004; Norton & Nufeld, 2002; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993; Singh et al., 1995; Stevenson & Baker, 1987), regardless of racial, economic or cultural background (Okagaki & Frensch, 1998). Parents’ knowledge of their children’s strengths, needs, experiences and problems must be shared with teachers. Through parent input, appropriate social and academic programs may be implemented in the classroom, especially in schools that are economically and racially diverse in order to meet the learning needs of all students (Delpit, 1995; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Parent and school interactions serve everyone involved, from students, parents and teachers to the rest of the community in encouraging students’ academic success (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Vivian, 2007; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes).
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*Why Are Home-School Partnerships A “Problem” Today?*

Children learn best when all adults in their lives provide a common message and unite to support them (Comer, 2005). But as society has become more complex and demanding, relationships among these parties have lacked priority in schools. Restructuring these relations will require a redefinition of roles and responsibilities within schools in order to redistribute power so that relationships can be upheld (Bauch & Goldring, 1998; Comer, 2005). Today, parents have high personal and job demands. Teachers are inundated with required duties, committees and meetings, in addition to planning, teaching, and grading. Administrators are overwhelmed with instructional and managerial tasks, with the added pressure of high-stakes testing (Andrews & Moorefield, 1991). As a result of these stresses, less regular communication occurs between home and school, thus causing misunderstandings, mistrust and lack of respect between families and educators (Comer). However, children and their academic learning cannot afford to have these relationships severed.

Due to work obligations, unique family structures, personal stress and economic hardship, parent involvement has changed over the years (Fullan, 1996). We see this change exacerbated in low-income urban homes, many of which are characterized by either a single mother, two working parents, or even by extended family members or foster parents raising the children. Furthermore, family members are from varied cultural backgrounds, work multiple jobs, have limited transportation, and themselves may have only reached a certain level of schooling (Cooper & Christie, 2005). Parents today, at all levels of a child’s education, may be ill-equipped to create an environment in which the home complements the school (Coleman, 1987) without the educational institution’s support. As a result of differences in cultural, economic and social backgrounds, a common vision between families and schools is missing
(Cooper & Christie, 2005). In addition, low-income, minority parents who do want to be involved may have differing perceptions than the school itself of what participation in school involves (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). These factors are exacerbated as children and their curriculums advance, rendering it even harder for these parents to potentially assist their children (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Epstein, 1985, 1986; Griffith, 1998).

Additionally, the “teacher-as-expert notion of teacher professionalism has reduced the historic, ‘community influence’ of parents, especially poor and immigrant parents, on public schooling” (Bauch & Goldring, 1998, p. 21). [The difficulty of involving parents relates to the professional culture that schools have worked hard to create with the intent of improving respect for the teaching profession (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994). While teachers are benefitting from more authority and more professionalism, it is important to remember that “when we walk into a school and see parents and teachers working together, in all sorts of roles, it’s a sure sign that the school challenges the very best in students and helps all, regardless of race, class or culture, to realize their fullest potential” (Comer & Haynes, 1997, p. 3). But, as the number of degrees teachers hold increases and ongoing professional development grows, training in why and how to involve parents as the primary educators of their children continues to be ignored.

Similarly, administrators in urban districts are inundated with the task of meeting state standards and raising scores on standardized tests in order to avoid punitive action by the federal government. Creating programs and partnerships takes time, and therefore can get lost in daily priorities (Andrews & Moorefield, 1991). However, led by the principal, it is the schools’ responsibility to find ways to expand the roles of parents so that they feel empowered to work in partnership with teachers, rather than in conflict and tension (Andrews & Moorefield; Fullan, 2003). This involves the leader changing the cultural context in which schools operate. When
leaders change this context, they change behaviors, which lead to a school culture based on high standards for everyone. This is found in common, as opposed to individual goals, for the school (Fullan, 2003). Authentic partnerships cannot be created until a culture of trust around the unifying goal of educating all children is reached (Birrell et al., 1998). This ultimate goal of raising achievement and focus on students can and should be the unifying factor for parents and school personnel (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). It is the school administration’s obligation to develop this type of environment within the school community.

Finally, middle level students themselves provide an interesting dynamic in family-school partnerships due to the distinct developmental stage at which they are seeking independence and peer approval (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Ward, 1982). These years are essential in furthering the students’ motivation to continue through high school and onto higher education. Youth must remain in nurturing environments where they feel they can be successful and build relationships they trust (Clearinghouse, 1996). Despite their craving for independence, early adolescents still need to feel connected to adults and cared for by them both at school and at home (Comer, 1989; Jackson & Davis; Ward). Even more powerful is a united message provided by the “spheres of influence” (Epstein, 1992, 1995): the home, the school and the community, which, when working together, have the most influential impact on student growth and development (Clearinghouse; Comer). Young adolescents’ unique developmental stage is marked by intellectual, social and physical transitions. A report from the Carnegie Corporation (Jackson & Davis) reinforces the National Middle School Association’s 1997 finding of seven conditions that young adolescents crave: “competence and achievement; opportunities for self-definition; creative expressions; physical activity; social interactions with adults and peers; structure and clear limits; and meaningful participation in family, school, and community” (pp.
Leaving No Family Behind

To bridge these significant transitions and aid in developmental changes, it would be beneficial for students to have schools and families working together.

*The Imperative for Parent Engagement in Low-Income, Urban Middle Schools*

Most notably, the stakes have never been higher for middle school students to achieve academically and to begin high school on the right track with coursework and strong study skills. Jobs that can sustain people and families for a lifetime no longer exist unless they have access to some form of higher education. The United States Department of Education (1999) recommends that planning for college begin as early as sixth grade, another indication of the central importance of middle school in eventual college access. Schools can play a key role in this process by “fostering academic preparation, supporting parent involvement, providing college and career planning information and helping students through the many steps of postsecondary planning” (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005, p. viii). This ACT-sponsored study of middle school students’ perceptions of college preparation resulted in four major recommendations, all of which involve parents in the college process beginning in middle school (Wimberly & Noeth).

The role of parents as partners is based on the understanding that parent participation and positive home-school relations are axiomatic for the success of students. This involvement must continue from elementary into middle school and beyond (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000).

In urban districts, Hoover-Dempsey, et al.’s (2005) empirical research has found that partnering with parents must begin with the school reaching out to parents first for several reasons: low-income, minority parents need guidance understanding the role the school desires them to take on to support academic work at home; low-income parents’ self-efficacy must be developed to build up the belief that they do have an effect on their child’s education; parents
must feel a general receptivity from the school to the essential nature of their engagement with
curriculum, programs and policies of the school; and they need to perceive that the school
recognizes the socio-contextual issues facing parents.

Home-school relationships also give parents access to “social capital” (Coleman, 1988). As applied to schools, and more specifically to low-income, urban, and minority students, social capital means information channels for navigating the schools’ systems (Kahne & Bailey, 1999). Social capital is gained by middle to upper class parents through their relationships with other parents, regular contact with school personnel, or personal experiences of educational institutions. However, for low-income, urban parents, who do not regularly have access to these relationships, channels of information, or multiple aspects of schooling, schools are responsible for helping to bridge channels of knowledge (Coleman & Hoffer, 2000) so that parents can become advocates in the school system for their children (Stanton-Salazaar, 1995, 1997). Also notable in low-income, urban schools with immigrant populations, families may not believe they should advocate or know their role could be more active within the schools because of cultural values and personal experience with schools in other countries. However, parents are the strongest hope for keeping students on track for high school and beyond for two main reasons: first, they remain the consistent human contact that youth have throughout their schooling, and second, their expectations are the greatest determinant in post-secondary attendance and retention for students (Arroya, Rhoad & Drew 1999; Hoover-Dempsey, 1997; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005).

Research Questions

Public schools are the binding and common experience in society today, and therefore have a large impact on economic, social and political outcomes, resulting in the expectation that they
be receptive to the needs of the public (Fullan, 1999). The intensification and expansion of
expectations of schools throughout the twentieth century to educate all children and raise the
achievement levels of all students regardless of race, class, gender, or special needs, has brought
us to the point of “Leaving No Child Behind” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, pp. 111-112).
Although this is a moral and legal obligation, it is not a civil right (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson &
Davies, 2007). Simultaneously, we have stopped including parents in this conversation.
Accountability measures are created by policy makers, not actually in schools, and mandated
through legislation, not actually monitored or monetarily supported (Epstein, 2005b). At the
local level, the infrequent, ritualized events of open houses and report card conferences have
created an inorganic structure that inhibits and masks expression, and unfortunately, too often,
acts as the only source of home and school coming together (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

This research intends to demonstrate that while schools must work to involve parents more
fully as the primary educators of their children, there may be unique structures and
developmental stages at the middle school level that require innovative ways in which parents,
teachers, and administrator must work together to raise student achievement. The complexity of
relationships between schools and families makes this endeavor difficult (Fullan, 2000).
Restructuring, involves “a redefinition of roles and relationships in schools and a redistribution
of power” in schools (Bauch & Goldring, 1998 p. 16). The potential for increased family
involvement could derive from deeper understanding simultaneous with more flexibility in role
definitions. Therefore, this study will address the following research questions:

1. What are parents’, teachers’, and administrators’ perceptions of the
appropriate role of parent involvement in low-income, urban middle
schools for efforts aimed at raising student achievement?
2. From these three points of view, what factors impact parent involvement aimed at raising student achievement in low-income urban middle schools?

3. How do perceptions of appropriate parent roles influence what transpires, or not regarding student achievement at the school?

From these questions, implications regarding what schools can do collectively to more effectively promote partnerships, as a means to enhance student achievement, have arisen and are also included in the findings.

Theoretical Rationale

The conceptual framework for this study is derived from and informed by several areas of parent involvement literature: the factors that frame why parents choose to get involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997); the types or levels that parents can choose to get involved (Epstein, 1995, 2005); the small, but growing literature of “partnership model” approaches for low-income schools to engage families; the need for low-income, urban middle schools to provide “social capital” for students and families to navigate education systems of high school and higher education. The theoretical framework of sociocultural theory will be used to address the potential agreement or disconnect between parents’, teachers’ and administrators’ values and beliefs concerning the parent role in urban middle schools with current social structures and behaviors that transpire at the school.

Conceptual Frameworks

Why Parents Choose to Get Involved

This study’s generalized four frame theory about why parents choose to get involved in their child’s education was developed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) with updated
findings by Hoover-Dempsey, et al. (2005). The first frame is role construction, which defines parents’ beliefs about their responsibilities in their child’s education. This first factor distinguishes between parents’ ideas about their responsibilities in day-to-day education versus overall major schooling decisions. Research has found systematic patterns to link values and behaviors related to role construction with child achievement (Hoover-Dempsey, 1997). The second frame is parents’ sense of efficacy: whether parents believe that through their involvement, they can have a positive influence on their child’s education. Research has shown ways that schools can help build parental efficacy in order to increase parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987, 1992). The third frame is general invitations, demands, and opportunities, which refers to parents’ perceptions of how much the school reaches out to invite or demand families to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey, 1997). Most recently, in a review of earlier research, Hoover-Dempsey, et al. (2005) added a fourth area: life-context variables that influence low-income, urban schools. These variables include skills, knowledge, time and energy of parents. Most notably, this aspect is influenced by school acknowledgment and responsiveness to these life-context variables (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005) facing families today.

These frames offer not only a context for what schools need to understand concerning parents’ choices whether or not to participate at school, but they also identify implicit and explicit barriers to involving low-income, urban parents who have their own cultural, historical and preconceived notions that they bring with them to schools (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Regarding this motivational theoretical framework for parents, it is important to note that role-constructions, the levels of efficacy, and the general invitations/demands by the school are all socially constructed factors. Therefore, these can be influenced by how much the school reaches
out to partner with families. But simultaneously, effects of parents’ personal histories, social constructions, as well as the current cultures in society and schools, make involvement a complex task with deeper meaning underlying the relationships between schools and homes (Lawrence-Lightfoot).

How Parents Choose to Get Involved

Epstein (1995) offers a six-tiered typology as a conceptual framework for understanding the levels at which schools can encourage parents to participate to create a comprehensive parent involvement program. Type 1, *parenting skills*, describes how adults have their own style of parenting their child, and, ultimately, how this affects children at school. Type 2, *communication*, involves how often and how meaningful the parents perceive the communication to be between themselves and the school, both with the classroom teachers and with overall school announcements. This level relies on two-way communication between home and school. Type 3, *volunteering*, is how often the parents are in the school helping in classrooms, chaperoning trips or events, and volunteering for other school programs. Type 4, *learning at home*, is the space, time and structure that parents create for academic activities at home that relate to school curriculum or as enrichment. This can be a space to do homework, trips to the library or conversations about what students are learning at school. Type 5, *school decision-making*, means the extent to which parents get involved on committees consulted for school decision-making. Type 6, *collaboration with the community*, is how much the school reaches out to the resources of the community and invites the community into the school for the purpose of serving the students and families.

These frameworks are particularly important because they remain the most widely-cited as a model for all levels of schooling. However, they have been empirically researched
extensively at the elementary level and have been criticized as representing traditional majority cultural values. In low-income urban schools, and particularly at the middle school level, it is appropriate to hypothesize that these types of involvement will look different. While these typologies are important considerations for schools and parents to take into consideration, this current study argues the need for home-school relationships to begin with a “partnership model” approach to first build understanding and relationships in low-income, urban schools. An essential aspect of this model is that as a social organization, the need for trust is related to school effectiveness. The term coined by Bryk and Schneider (2002), “relational trust” refers to “the distinctive qualities of interpersonal social exchanges in school communities and how these cumulate in an organizational property” (p. 12). In other words, schools should organize the work of adults through a coherent environment based on the development of what is best for children. This requires social trust among multiple adult stakeholders for the creation of partnerships.

**Partnership Model Approach**

The “partnership model” approach has a small, but growing literature (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007). While the term is new, the factors incorporated have been produced in many studies: redefining and potentially expanding roles and definitions of parent involvement (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Kratzer, 1997); using non-traditional ways to involve parents (Sanders, 1999); building mutual and trusting relationships (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003); clarifying of expectations from both the home and the school on what each needs from one another (Jackson & Cooper, 1992); creating comprehensive programs that involve the entire school community (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein 2005); communicating a united message from all adults of high aspirations and expectations for students
that their education matters (Hoge, 1997; Singh, 1995; Xu, 2004); and building “relational trust” among all adults so that the nature of daily social interactions is not lost while adults work to do what is best for students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Meier, 2002). While “support models” can incorporate some of these aspects, there is a deeper commitment for parents to be invited to partner with the school around the important conversations affecting their children’s education. Therefore, parents, teachers, and administrators need to first be asked how they envision the role of parents, rather than assuming that the traditional models and approaches are ideal for every school community. Using the partnership approach, this research will seek to understand the beliefs of parents, teachers and administrators about how these relationships are enacted in low-income, urban middle schools based on the distinct needs of this age group and on the importance of this level of schooling for future education and career success.

Social Capital Theory

Coleman’s social capital theory (1988), defined as the ability of parents to access resources useful in navigating school institutions and finding support in the challenging task of being an effective parent, found its origins in Bourdieu’s work (1985). Social capital provides a unique perspective on the urgent need for schools to reach out to their parents, especially in low-income, urban schools with high levels of minority students. Kahne and Bailey (1999) assert that social capital is a means to personal “human capital” defined as an individual’s ability to navigate social systems. For low-income, urban youth, social capital is not currently obtained from their parents for the sake of their own human capital. However, social capital has the potential to be accessed by both students and parents through the school to navigate and understand educational institutions’ resources. Lareau (1987) described this as access to “cultural capital,” in which children of higher socio-economic status enter schools with the ability to
utilize particular linguistic structures, authority patterns and types of curricula that they have already had experience navigating within their home culture. In similar work, Coleman and Hoffer (2000), Kahne and Bailey (1999), and Stanton-Salazar (1995, 1997) took Coleman’s theories into the schools and observed social capital’s effect on relations between the home, community, and schools and found that social capital constitutes intangible relationships. These findings have great implications for this research because many low-income parents have been shown to have low levels of social capital, and therefore do not have the information or resources to better advocate for and assist their students in educational processes (Stanton-Salazaar, 1995, 1997), which can be gained from relationships. As directly related to this research, the social capital that students might gain from their parents’ relationships to other parents and school personnel for the purpose of access and advocacy is lost for many low-income, urban students because their parents do not have their own personal cultural or human capital. In other words, parents do not have access to the dominant cultural values the school operates within: therefore, the students do not benefit from this information or the ability to navigate school institutions most effectively. Thus, this research will explore diverse perspectives to be shared for the purpose of understanding one another as the first step to relationship building.

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural Theory

This research’s theoretical lens for data analysis is based on sociocultural theory, which evaluates the social context in which culture operates. Geertz (1973) makes the distinction: “culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form action takes, the actually existing network of social relations” (p. 145). This research seeks to find, within the culture and social context of the adult
relationships in the school, the possible agreement or disjuncture between culture and social context. More recent sociocultural theorists (Gee, 1990; Lareau, 2003; Mehan, 2008) argue that their perspective recognizes the distinct cultures of a learning community (as in a school or a classroom), as well as the particular backgrounds and capabilities of learners (individual students). In particular, students and their parents from a non-dominant perspective bring distinct values and beliefs to a school. This set of values and beliefs often fails to meet mainstream cultural beliefs within schools, or schools fail to afford access to non-dominant families that accounts for these differences. Therefore, this research explores sociocultural theory on two levels. The first is a more broad level of institutional dominant cultures of schools as compared to the individual families from varying backgrounds. The second and more specific level is within this one school; that of the embedded culture surrounding parent involvement with the social structures created for the purpose of parent involvement.

Geertz (1973) argues that within the discontinuities of social and cultural aspects of human life, one is able to find “the primary driving forces of change” (p. 144). These concepts, together with a collaborative approach towards intentionally improving the current situation, could lead to a change in more productive relationships between home and school. Finding ways to improve relations among parents, teachers and administrators for the sake of raising middle school student achievement is necessary to level the playing field for opportunities in high school, higher education and beyond for low-income, urban middle school students.

For schools that serve low-income, urban families, the combination of parents’ cultural backgrounds, individual educational experiences and personal aspirations yields beliefs surrounding their vision and decision-making for their children’s education (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007). By disentangling the values from the social structures in
place at the school, adult stakeholders can first understand the beliefs regarding the appropriate role of parents in order to develop approaches to increasing the level of family engagement directly with middle school personnel. “Research is viewed as… one among many factors that forges connections between different institutions, people and things, creating, fomenting, and halting social processes” (Saukko, 2008, p. 459). Sociocultural studies have the ability to bring multiple perspectives within social realities to light. This research is based on the position that until beliefs and values of the multiple groups of adult stakeholders charged with educating our youth are understood by one another regarding the appropriate role of parents, they cannot possibly serve students in the best ways possible.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant on several levels. On a very practical level, this study provides applications that may be used by low-income, urban middle schools to more fully involve parents in raising student achievement. On a deeper level, it addresses social justice and equity issues through the lens of increasing social capital for low-income students and parents. By gathering the perceptions, experiences and attitudes of urban middle school parents, teachers and administrators regarding roles and responsibilities of parent involvement, these essential stakeholders are better able to support students’ academic and social growth with the aim of closing existing achievement gaps in urban districts. Finally, from a research perspective, this study attempts to fill the gap left by previous research done with regard to authentic parent partnerships in low-income, urban middle schools from the perspective of those who most closely support students.
Practical Applications at the Middle School Level

Schools as institutions can no longer afford to classify practices at the middle school level of schooling with either elementary school or with high school. The needs of young adolescent students are unique and crucial to their social, emotional and intellectual development. Middle school students are developmentally at a stage in which they tend to seek peer approval while pushing parents and authority farther away (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1998). Yet their young age paired with tremendous physical, social, emotional and intellectual growth means that adults in their lives need to remain in close contact with them to guide them through these transitions (Jackson & Davis, 2000). The middle years are a key turning point in motivation and interests for potential future educational endeavors. Through understanding the perceptions, values, beliefs, attitudes and experiences of parents, teachers and administrators, this research has a practical application for how these stakeholders might better understand one another in order to work in partnership to more effectively raise standards for students.

Social Justice and Equity

This research has significant implications for social justice and equity in schools and arguably, for the common good of society. Low-income, urban parents, who are often minority families, require the same access to social capital in order to prepare our youth for college and careers. With growing diversity in school populations today, the number of traditionally labeled “minority” students will continue to increase in schools across the country. As educators and members of society, we are obligated to prepare all youth as the potential future leaders of our neighborhoods, cities, states and country. This translates into not only providing a high-quality education in urban schools, but also into bridging access to the information systems and means of navigating higher education.
Closing the Achievement Gap

Furthermore, this research has implications for the essential nature of the middle school years as a transition time during which schools have the opportunity to put students and families on track regarding higher education (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). If the ultimate purpose of schools is to create productive citizens in our globalized economy and international market, we must continue to educate our youth to meet the present needs of society (Goodlad, 2000). The gap between the poor and the rich in our country is growing. In order to level the playing field for our low-income, urban youth, all adults must act as students’ advocates and work together to raise levels of achievement. Achievement entails not only academic training, but also modeling and teaching youth to form relationships, navigate change and work through conflict (Comer, 2005) if they are to prosper in our global economy today. This research offers adult stakeholders one another’s perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of parents at the middle school level to best raise student achievement.

Research Implications

From a research perspective, this study is significant in its acknowledgement of the voice and perspective of those carrying out federal, state and local district mandates regarding home-school partnerships. Spillane (2005) argues that policy is only as good as its implementation. Since research is lacking both at the middle school level and with regard to authentic partnership models, it is imperative that at this time, underlying values and beliefs are heard from those who carry policy out at the local level (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1996). These voices allow for a better understanding of how relationships could be made more meaningful, power more equally distributed, and practices better tailored in order to meet the needs of adults working with youth.
To bridge the gap between theory and practice, on a praxis level, this research arises at a crucial time for the Roslyn Public School district. With the recent release of the superintendent’s plan to re-align the district, the need to identify ways in which middle schools can satisfy parents has never been more apparent. The superintendent has stated that decisions are based on parents seeking more consistency and fewer transitions in their children’s schooling. As a result, the number of middle schools available for students has been reduced from eighteen available in the 2008-2009 school year to just nine in the 2009-2010 school year. The rest will convert into K-8 schools with local elementary schools, or into 6-12 schools with local high schools. There is an obvious cry from parents to feel more connected to their children’s school at the middle school level. This study has the potential to expose elements needed for middle school communities to create more meaningful home-school partnerships, and to unite these three stakeholders around raising student achievement in low-income, urban middle schools.

Research Design

This research uses descriptive qualitative methods. It is comprised of a single case study design in one low-income urban middle school in the Roslyn Public School district with an underlying action research stance. This case study explores the perceptions, understandings, values, beliefs and experiences of parents, teachers and administrators about parent participation in raising student achievement through the belief that a partner approach yields more effective results in low-income, urban middle schools. This study involves qualitative case study research and is appropriate for this topic given the nature of the question and the state of the current literature. In particular, data collection entails semi-focused interviews, participant observations, and artifact analysis to further develop the existing literature of parent involvement in middle schools, and to intentionally try to improve the current situation at one low-income, urban middle
school. With this action research stance to collaboratively improve the current situation, data has been analyzed using a sociocultural theoretical lens. Overarching methods are discussed below, but more detailed research approaches, analysis techniques, and theoretical frameworks are presented in Chapter Three.

**Qualitative Research**

When beginning research, it is important that the methodology be centered on the research questions and on the purpose of the study. Subsequently, considerations have been made around what information answers the questions and which strategies are most sufficient (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). This research centers on three questions that explore the perceptions of parents, teachers and administrators regarding home-school partnerships, the factors that impact parent involvement, and the influence of these factors on what actually transpires at the school. Potentially, implications have arisen for what schools can do collectively to promote partnerships between home and school to enhance student achievement. The questions are not only exploratory in nature, but seek to determine people’s values, beliefs and perceptions that shape actual practices at low-income, urban middle schools. A qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews, observations, and analysis of documents is appropriate to gain a richer understanding of the actual experience in low-income, urban middle schools today.

**Case Study**

Within this qualitative research, case study methodology is appropriate due to the questions and frameworks in which this study is based. Although generalized concepts of why, how and when to involve parents exists, schools need to develop these partnerships based on their individual school communities. These partnerships involve multifaceted social relations implicating much deeper cultural and historical narratives than may be first apparent (Lawrence-
Leaving No Family Behind

Therefore, attempting to understand these complicated relationships in the context of cultural and historical factors necessitates “the distinctive need for case studies” that “arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena” (Yin, 2003, p. 2). Previous research conducted solely in middle schools is outdated due to the more recent mandates of N.C.L.B., M.G.L./M.E.R.A. and even local policy at the district level. Schools now struggle to implement parent involvement policies and procedures, furthering the need to examine the full context and set of factors at individual schools. “The case study is preferred in examining contemporary events” (Yin, 2003, p. 8). The issues addressed in this study reflect the struggle for urban middle schools today, and incorporate a full picture of the lived beliefs and experiences of participants. One purpose of a case study is to “…illustrate certain topics within an evaluation… in a descriptive mode” (Yin, 2003, p. 13). Within this case study, a deeper understanding is reached through the triangulation of data sources, namely, semi-structured interviews, participant observations and artifact analysis.

This case study is further enhanced by action research methods, since the researcher has been present in the building for nine months prior as the principal intern in the school year 2007-2008, and for fifteen months as a participant and facilitator of the School Parent Council during the school year as intern, through to the present. Most recently, the researcher has become solely a participant, passing off facilitation responsibilities such as agenda and minute creation to executive members of the council. The role of principal intern has allowed more informal conversation with teachers and administrators regarding the role of parents. The role of participant on the parent council has allowed the researcher great insights into the ways in which parents seek to get involved, individual barriers to family engagement, and informal conversation regarding the role of parents. Finally, the role of facilitator of the parent council has allowed the
researcher to actively help increase the presence of parents at school events and as a parent council.

*Data Sources*

To gain a more complete understanding of findings from the analysis of data, several sources have been used. “The case study’s unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations” (Yin, 2003, p. 8). Within this particular case study design, three sources of evidence were selected and included: semi-structured interviews, participant observation and physical artifacts (Yin, 2003). The semi-structured interviews are used to triangulate perspectives from the three roles that ultimately affect parent involvement at the school - namely the administrative role, the teacher role and the parent role. In using the same set of focused, yet open-ended questions for each participant while gaining multiple perspectives on the same issues, it is possible to recognize emerging themes and to understand the viewpoints of each adult at this particular school. “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). The transcribed interviews yield the primary data to provide perspectives regarding parent engagement. Simultaneously, the participant observations at parent council meetings and school events, such as open house, allow the beliefs of each group of stakeholders to be seen in action, and the overall social structures to be put in place. Artifact analysis provides a source of documented priorities with regard to what is actually communicated from school to home and which issues are discussed at parent council meetings. This documentation assists in confirmation of emerging themes.
Data Analysis

The use of multiple data sources help validate the data analysis process. The large amounts of qualitative data yielded from this study have been organized using HyperRESEARCH software as a structuring tool. In organizing the data from various interviews, and in confirming themes through the observations and artifacts, careful triangulation of data sources allows deep understanding of participants’ experiences and perceptions. “It is understood, however, that each practice makes the world visible in a different way.” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 5). These multiple data sources, as they reach saturation, provide a more complete picture of what is happening among adult stakeholders in the school community at this low-income, urban middle school. This is furthered by an “action research” stance seeking to collaborate with participants to improve family school partnerships with the intent of raising student achievement. Through a sociocultural lens, the three units of analysis are critically evaluated. For the first step, general “open coding” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) revealed multiple beliefs and values as related to behaviors and actions. These ideas were then chunked for “axial codes” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to provide major themes to describe beliefs and values regarding the parent role at this middle school, to answer the particular research question, and to provide implications for improvement of current home-school partnerships.

Limitations of the Study

In choosing a single case study of one low-income, urban middle school in the Roslyn Public School District, I have limited my results and findings to implications for the one school itself with the possibility of other middle schools in the district with similar demographics. These limitations are derived from both the methods and the sample. First, the context of the school itself confines the perceptions and beliefs to this setting and may not be applicable to other
districts or to other schools within the district. Second, in the choice of focusing interviews on the adults, this study will not explore these roles from the students’ perspective. A third potential limitation to this study is my own in-depth participation at this school, as both the former principal intern and the facilitator of the parent council. However, I view this deep understanding of multiple perspectives, multifaceted roles and responsibilities as an asset to the study’s accuracy of descriptions and understandings. Finally, the sample itself poses a limitation since the diverse population of families, teachers and administrators cannot all be heard. Although saturation of findings have been reached and purposeful sampling helps reach the broadest possible range of representative stakeholders, it is not possible within the scope of this research to meet all cultural, social and contextual variables of families and staff.

Summary/Preview

In Chapter One, I briefly overviewed the study at hand, while touching on the many facets of this study, namely: the legal obligations of schools to involve their students’ parents; the research questions defining this research; the problem that persists in the literature and within the practice of schools; the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underlying the research design; the significance of this particular study; the major research methods employed; and a brief recognition of the limitations of the study. In Chapter Two, there is significantly deeper reviews of the literature that addresses the legal mandates; the significance of the middle level of schooling; reviews of parent involvement components and practices; the significance of social capital within this urban, low-income setting; arguments for partnership models over support models; and the contextual issues of middle school involvement. The third chapter addresses the significance and applicability of qualitative case study methods. This will provide a rationale for why giving voice to the adults who are expected to carry out parent partnership can only be
understood and improved through an action research stance with sociocultural theory analysis. The fourth chapter will present the data collected in written form and provide visual charts and maps for navigation. This data shows how low-income, urban middle school parents can be further tapped as resources by the schools in their effort to raise student achievement levels and provide a motivational base for high school, higher education and productive citizenship. The fifth chapter analyzes the significance of the data, presents findings for both a theoretical framework within a partnership approach and a practical level of implementation by low-income, urban middle schools, while setting an agenda for future research.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Overview

In Chapter Two, the literature related to the current study is reviewed. This includes: the importance of parent involvement for students, parents, teachers, administrators and the community; background on parent involvement research that exists; the history of the formation of middle schools and young adolescent developmental growth during this level of schooling; reviews of specific studies pertinent to this current research; models of “partnership” versus “support” in urban schools; and the pieces of the existing literature in need of particular consideration for this study. Overall, the gap in the literature, which this study seeks to begin to fill, is created through the exploration of what is known and what is missing.

Introduction

Children learn best when all adults in their lives provide a common message and unite to support them (Comer, 2005). Epstein (1995) calls these the “overlapping spheres of influence” comprised of the family, the school, and the community in which students learn and grow. The partnership between these three spheres locates the child at the center. But as society has become more complex and demanding, relationships between homes, schools, and communities have not remained a priority (Comer). Parents are overwhelmed by increasingly intense jobs, personal lives, and economic struggles. Teachers are inundated with additional responsibilities and services for students, in addition to their regular preparation, teaching, and grading tasks. School administrators feel the pressure of federal, state and district mandates to raise student achievement levels as defined by high-stakes testing. Finally, schools located in a particular community serve students from other neighborhoods, so the connections between schools, families and communities are strained, if they exist at all (Comer, 1989).
The lack of honest and consistent communication has resulted in an environment of mistrust between families and educators (Comer, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). However, children cannot afford to have these relationships severed. Parent involvement has recently changed even more as the “teacher-as-expert notion of teacher professionalism has reduced the historic community influence of parents, especially poor and immigrant parents, on public schooling” (Bauch & Goldring, 1998, p. 21). The complexity of involving parents in schools is related to the professional school culture that schools have worked hard to create (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994). While teachers are enjoying more professionalism with regard to teaching qualifications, degrees in education and ongoing professional development, a lack of training in the creation of partnerships with families still exists for educators, especially in middle schools, (Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

However, the investment needed for middle school students to perform well on high-stakes tests is necessary for students to enroll in rigorous high school courses, for high school graduation, and for enrollment in college. In today’s economy, students need both a high school and a higher education degree to obtain employment that allows them to be economically stable. A contributing factor in students’ access to and continuation in higher education is parent involvement in their education. Parental expectations for student success and the information parents have to help navigate their child through educational institutions, furthers enrollment and support for retention in higher education (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005).

The state of the literature is inconclusive as to whether there is a direct correlation between parent involvement and student achievement (Mattingly et al., 2002; Ferguson, 2005). However, the potential benefits explored point to its contribution in multifaceted aspects of positive outcomes for students, parents, teachers, administrators and whole communities.
Furthermore, it has been argued that home-school partnerships, through mutual and trusting relationships, authentic communication and united messages to children, may help to build equity in our schools (Ferguson; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) and to raise student achievement in low-income, urban schools.

Why Parent Involvement?

Although the overall state of the literature is inconclusive regarding the positive effect of parent involvement on students’ educational outcomes (Mattingly et al., 2002), this research takes the stance that home-school partnerships do make a difference for students’ academic, social and emotional growth (Jeynes, 2004; Turner, Nye & Schwartz, 2004). These optimistic outcomes potentially extend beyond the student and may influence an entire school community in terms of its overall positive climate, motivating culture and attainable high standards with support for students. Both the inconsistencies in some literature and the conclusive findings regarding positive outcomes are presented below.

The Overall State of the Literature Regarding Parent Involvement Benefits

In a review of research on parent involvement, Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez & Kayaz (2002), reviewed 41 studies evaluating K-12 parent involvement programs. They found major methodological and evaluative flaws, resulting in inconclusive evidence about the claims so many researchers are making about the positive effect of parent involvement on student academic achievement. An interesting finding pertinent to the research at hand is that parents and teachers were not found to play significant roles in these studies–teachers were found to have participated in the development of ten programs (29% of 34 programs), and parents participated in only 5 (15% of 34 programs). The researchers conclude that, due to lack of validity, lack of control groups, and reliance on subjective indicators of effectiveness, parent involvement studies
have produced inconclusive findings regarding causal relationships between parent involvement and student achievement (Mattingly et al., 2002). But these same researchers state their uncertainty in claiming that parent involvement is not effective. Instead, they recommend more rigorous standards for research in this area of study.

In similar research that reviewed parent involvement studies’ standards, Ferguson’s (2005) report to address the Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI), noted hesitancies in conclusive evidence of correlating parent involvement with student achievement based on research methodologies he found unclear and/or poorly carried out. This study added that the broad range of parent engagement programs, activities and components lead to “messy” research on parent involvement. However, Ferguson also reports on two more intensive studies of particular interest that qualify and drive his research. He cites Jeynes’ (2004) meta-analysis of secondary students, which found “Parental involvement programs … influenced educational outcomes, although to a lesser degree than preexisting expressions of parental support” (p. 17). This finding points to the relationship of student achievement to parental styles and parent communication of educational expectations as having a greater impact on older students. This is in lieu of particular parent involvement programs, events, volunteering or fundraising directly at the school.

The second study (Turner, Nye & Schwartz, 2004) also reports a meta-analysis of K-5 parental involvement programs, based on 19 studies among hundreds that met rigorous standards of research. This research included: parent activities outside of school; academic achievement measured as an outcome; and treatment and control groups that used random assignment. The results from Jeynes and Turner, Nye and Schwartz yielded statistically significant effect sizes that could attribute student success in part to parent involvement.
Ferguson (2005) concludes that some parenting programs produce desired improvements in achievement and some do not. At the same time, specific interventions may have different effects at varying school settings. Therefore, he concluded, strategies must differ based on the particular population that the school serves, they must be reevaluated as populations change, and they must build the capacity for parents to improve their own situations. Ferguson cites Loury’s (2002) work within social capital as it relates to school. Loury notes that poor white and non-white families are often stigmatized by assumptions of inferiority by school staff. Thus, it is necessary that they believe that the school cares about and respects their children before they will consider getting involved at the school. Therefore, an understanding of perceptions, roles, possible responsibility reconstructions and culture shifts is needed before program implementation. In addition, the voices of parents, teachers and administrators should be recognized before the implementation of any new programs in order to meet the condition of partnership rather than assumed support (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007). Finally, more rigorous research should be conducted solely at the middle school level, where conclusive evidence is needed.

Although the overall state of the literature is inconclusive, the benefits of parent partnership have the potential to contribute to students’ academic and social success. It has been found that students whose families are involved in their learning earn better grades, remain in school longer, enroll in higher-level courses, have higher graduation rates and are more likely to enroll in higher education (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007). But the benefits do not are not solely for the child. Collaborative approaches help administration to build a positive image of the school for the public, offer community agencies access to people they want to serve in the neighborhood, and connect parents with information to navigate school institutions. In
turn, giving these parents confidence in their role and providing teachers with information on the children they teach daily (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies).

**Benefits for Students**

Research has shown that active participation by parents has potential benefits for students. The first area of benefit to students is in school discipline and behavior. Sheldon and Epstein’s (2002), quantitative, two-part survey, which included 47 schools in a range of socio-economic status and regional areas, found that with increased family and community involvement, regardless of prior rates of discipline, the number of office visits, detentions and suspensions decreased. The aspects of involvement that were found to be the most effective were parenting skills and the regularity of volunteering at the school. While discipline and structure are essential for teaching and learning to be consistent and effective, more research has focused directly on how parent involvement can increase academic achievement among urban students (Jeynes, 2005).

But some studies have shown that parental involvement is integral to student academic success regardless of economic, racial or cultural background (Jeynes, 2005; Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993). Teachers benefit when parents share their knowledge of their children’s strengths, needs, experiences and problems, so that appropriate social and academic programs can be implemented in the classroom (Henderson et al., 2007; Jeynes, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). This is especially important for urban students from low-income families who have the most to gain if school communities work for greater and more meaningful parent involvement (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Equity in schools can be built only through schools’ work with parents (Ferguson, 2005). Especially in low-income, urban schools where enrollment is marked by diverse cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds, administrators and teachers need to work
towards “culturally relevant teaching,” or connecting curriculum to students’ home lives (Ladson-Billings, 1994) to keep students engaged and enrolled, especially at the middle school level.

For the purpose of this study, it is notable that the benefits reach farther than just the students; they also reach the adult stakeholders involved, and the community at large. Parent and school interactions not only serve the student directly, but also serve the relationships formed and partnerships created, namely between parents, teachers, administrators and the community (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). These relationships may help raise student achievement and create benefits for each of these individual parties. Consequently, creating more positive school climate, high standards throughout the school, and a united message about the importance of education to all students.

Benefits for Parents

Numerous empirical studies have found that parent participation benefits the parents themselves while affecting their children’s success. The first marker is that their involvement in schools helps them understand their own role as parents in order to set expectations and boundaries, and to build relationships with their children around their confidence in their children’s education and future (Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997; Ramirez, 2004). It is important to note that role constructs are both socially formed and consist of a set of expectations held by a group, for an individual (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997). Since the perceived role a person holds encompasses values, goals and expectations, it must be assumed that parent actions and involvement are framed by this socially constructed belief. Parents who seek partnerships with the school find ways to support their children’s learning and to take
ownership of their role in their children’s education, leading to increased student gains (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones).

The second benefit for parents is increased self-efficacy, which is grounded in Bandura’s (1986) work and defined as parents’ belief in their own ability to exert a positive influence on their children’s education. In other words, if parents believe that their efforts to get involved in their child’s education actually make a difference, they are more likely to do so. In Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie’s (1992) research, parent efficacy has small effects from variables directly related to school activities such as volunteering and educational activities at home. But significant findings related more to parent-teacher relations, such as teachers’ perceptions of parent efficacy. Also significant was the fact that teachers with higher efficacy tend to invite parents into their classroom more often, thus building the parents’ sense of efficacy. Another form of increasing parents’ sense of efficacy was found in Ramirez’s (2004) study of parenting classes at one urban middle school. Parents gained the confidence to approach teachers more frequently, to ask more meaningful questions, and to feel more confident in approaching their children with questions about school life, as a result of school-based training.

Finally, parents gain social capital, a term defined as the ability of parents to access resources useful in navigating school institutions and finding support in the challenging task of being an effective parent. This derives from Coleman’s (1988) research, which defines social capital as including six major areas: understanding obligations and expectations; recognizing information channels; having access to norms and effective sanctions of communication and behavior; understanding authority relations and hierarchical structures; being perceptive of appropriate social organization and appreciation and tolerance for intentional organization. Through Coleman’s work, the value of social relationships was seen to complement personal
knowledge, which defines human capital. Kahne and Bailey (1999) conducted research with low-income, urban, minority schools and students. This research found that these families and students need information to navigate school systems, both within schools where students currently study, and in making appropriate transitions to the next level. When parents of middle-class status interact with one another, they often use information they gain about schooling and the school itself to become aligned with school expectations and to define their role within that system (Lareau, 1987). When parents of lower-class status are unable to attend events, socialize with other parents or meet with teachers, they do not gain a form of social capital, called cultural capital, which is access to dominant cultural norms and values. This includes obtaining information that could benefit their children’s education directly or their own ability to respond to the school appropriately in order to advocate for their child (Lareau, 1987).

Redistributing these social resources to urban families of low socioeconomic status has great potential to bring about greater quality in parents’ educational promotion skills. Additionally, social networks with other parents in the school benefit the whole school community (Lareau & Shumar, 1996). In under-resourced school communities, school personnel must bridge the information system for parents (Coleman & Hoffer, 2000) to help parents learn how to become advocates for their child (Stanton-Salazaar, 1995, 1997). Furthermore, better understanding the relationships between the work of parents, teachers and administrators and student achievement depends on knowledge of the relationships between these stakeholders and their transmission of information. While Lareau (1989) recognizes the further strain of unequal power distributions for low-income, urban parents, Schaeffer-McDaniel (2004) has shown that when social capital is increased for parents, there is a parallel increase in student achievement and better communication between all stakeholders in a school community.
Benefits for Teachers

In Garcia’s (2004) quantitative survey study of teachers, the benefits of parent involvement coincide with the above student outcomes of teachers engaging in less discipline and students achieving higher levels academically. They also coincide with the individual teacher benefit of higher morale and job satisfaction. Exactly how parent-teacher relationships are achieved seems to relate to teacher levels of efficacy. For teachers, efficacy refers to how certain they feel that their instructional skills produce effective student outcomes. The higher teacher efficacy is perceived to be, the more likely they are to feel sure enough in their own skills to welcome parents into the classroom and school (Garcia). Efficacy is usually directly related to the level of schooling and preparation of the teacher (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987, 1992). Building teacher efficacy begins in undergraduate programs, which must begin to address why and how teachers need to work in partnership with parents to prepare pre-service teachers for actual school settings (Birrell et al., 1998; Howey, 2000; Whitney et al., 1992). Additionally, schools should provide ongoing training for teachers on how to actively involve parents, how to understand their respective school’s particular parent population, and how to be part of school-wide initiatives (Arroyo, Rhoad & Drew, 1999). Teachers who maintain a greater level of efficacy reported greater job satisfaction and remained committed to working toward greater academic outcomes for their students (Dembo & Gibson, 1985). In turn, teachers who have higher levels of efficacy tend to reach out to parents to encourage them to become involved in the school and classroom more often. This gives teachers even more opportunities to create higher levels of efficacy for themselves (Garcia, 2004). Finally, teachers who are parent involvement leaders in their schools tend to establish more equitable programs that help students
meet higher levels of achievement, implying that parent involvement benefits teachers in under-resourced neighborhoods (Epstein, 1986).

Benefits for Administrators

When administrators promote parent partnerships, teachers then make more of an effort to involve parents. Therefore, the potential benefits for administrators as they attempt to forge these partnerships may occur on several levels. These originate from the “overlapping spheres of influence” of families and schools on student achievement and school effectiveness (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Among these benefits are student achievement, more effective teacher pedagogy, and overall better support of the school. School-wide benefits come from a cyclical effect on staff-parent relations and on student achievement: when teachers seek partnership, parents tend to feel more empowered to assist their child. As a result, student achievement increases by both indirect parent supports of learning and by direct teacher practices to accommodate curriculum to meet student needs. Teachers who practice culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994) do not feel as affected by the potential disadvantages that urban students may have (Delpit, 2006). Teachers then feel better about their work and their own efficacy, and reach out to parents even more. This cycle of partnership continues and positively affects administrators’ abilities to lead a whole school learning community.

This cycle produces a better overall image of the school, which for public schools is essential today in our market-driven education system of charter schools, voucher programs and private school options. Besides having greater public relations with the community and within the district, it is important that the community respects the work the school is doing and trusts that the students who graduate will go on to become industrious citizens. (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007). When this support exists throughout a community, more initiatives
and reforms are supported monetarily and given ample implementation, time, and support. In addition, with the decline in financial resources available to schools, community agencies have the opportunity to become partners through volunteering time, physical resources, and/or connections to the school (Andrews & Moorefield, 1991). For administrators, increased student achievement, support from community, and higher staff morale is essential to lead schools towards their goals of academic excellence and equity (Andrews & Moorefield). These benefits allow administrators to transform their own conception of their role as leaders from leading an organization to leading a school community. This community feel to a school is comprised of trusting relationships and positive school climate, which ultimately leads to increased administrator morale (Sergiovanni, 1994).

Benefits for the Community

For the larger neighborhood community, when schools are succeeding, the economic benefits are clear: families inhabit these communities in the fullest sense, they develop a sense of pride in their home and neighborhood, and their businesses flourish. Communities want to know that their schools are raising productive and respectful citizens, and not only that students’ academic performance is improving (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007), although the two are closely tied. When children observe adults interacting and negotiating for the sake of their education, they also receive not only a powerful message about academics, but also one of values and relationships—how decisions are abided by once made, and how conflict is resolved (Comer, 2005). These overlapping “spheres of influence” are found in three major contexts – the home, the school and the community, and children’s academic and social growth (Epstein, 1995).
Leaving No Family Behind

Schools and communities can help serve families, just as families can augment the success of a community. In low-income minority communities, often churches, community centers, libraries or YMCAs act as a less threatening place for families and educators to come together. When community agencies, which often have positive relationships with students, work with schools, they can move closer to meeting substantive education goals (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). This is most likely to happen when schools assume leadership roles in order to recruit community agencies, and when communities take on active roles to develop activities that complement educational goals (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes). Furthermore, community agencies can more expediently and effectively reach the populations they serve and, at the same time, promote public support for their work (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007). Equity in schools can only be built through working with parents and the community. It is not just the moral idea of promoting student achievement and closing the achievement gap in low income-urban neighborhoods, but it is also about great economic implications for the future of communities and the individuals, who comprise them (Ferguson, 2005).

Why Parent Involvement Now?

The imperative for schools to create more effective, authentic and meaningful home-school partnerships begins with the current mandates in place at the federal, state and local level. But the real benefits occur when communities and schools are united to provide safe and stimulating environments that give youth purpose in their schooling, and a safe place to develop as productive and caring citizens.

Legal Mandates

Despite education marked as “states’ rights,” through the United States Constitution, the federal government has used spending clause statutes to mandate programs and policies. In 1965,
with the creation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), policy decisions were implemented through federal money allocations to support schools. Within this act, Title I through Title VII were created in an attempt to more equitably fund schools, to create more unified organization within the education system nationally, and to push states to take their education programs more seriously. Since 1965, this act has been updated and upheld by government administrations that have taken office, (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). But, since the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), education has become more of a focus of the federal government, most recently and notably because of the latest version of ESEA, now known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2002). 

As it stands now, the federal statute, NCLB, has mandated that schools will only receive federal funding if they “implement programs, activities and procedures for the involvement of parents” (20 USCA § 6318). This includes the requirement that schools “develop jointly with, agree on with and distribute to, parents of participating children a written parent involvement policy” (20 USCA § 6318). This policy should ensure that there is shared responsibility between school personnel and families: “The school and parents will build and develop a partnership to help children achieve the State’s high standards” and communicate to parents “the ways in which each parent will be responsible for supporting their children’s learning” (20 USCA § 6318). In addition, it is stated that schools will build this capacity by providing services to parents that help them “in understanding such topics as the State’s academic content standards, State student academic achievement standards,” and “provide materials and training parents to work with their children” (20 USCA § 6318).
The federal government has outlined and defined what should be happening at schools in general. It then allocates to state agencies the responsibility to hold districts accountable. For example, there are “specific steps the State educational agency will take to ensure that both school wide programs and targeted assistance schools provide instruction by highly qualified instructional staff” (20 USCA § 1114(b)(1)(C) and 1115(c)(1)(E)). In each state, a “highly qualified” teacher not only has a degree in education and in their subject area (in middle and high schools), but they also take certification tests to determine their competencies. At the state level, this translates into states not only tightening certification requirements, but also mandating tests that measure a wide range of teacher abilities, among them, the ability to effectively communicate with parents. In other words, in Massachusetts, this means: “To be eligible for certification as a provisional educator, the candidate shall… Pass a test established by the board which shall consist of two parts [including] a writing section which shall demonstrate the communication and literacy skills necessary for improved instruction and improved communication between school and parents” (M.G.L. 71 § 38G). Teachers will not be permitted to practice without having already proven their ability to clearly and effectively communicate with parents.

At the school level, the state has imposed several legal obligations on schools to engage parents in school decision-making and in participation in many facets of the school community. For example, the school site councils are responsible for setting the educational and professional development goals of teachers. “The principal of each school, in consultation with the school council established pursuant to this section shall adopt educational goals for the schools…The plan shall address professional development for the school’s professional staff…the enhancement of parental involvement in the life of the school… establishment of a welcoming
school environment characterized by tolerance and respect for all groups” (Massachusetts General Laws, M.G.L. 46 § 82). In addition, “Every school district in the commonwealth shall adopt and implement a professional development plan for all principals, teachers, other professional staff, paraprofessionals and teacher assistants employed by the district… Said plan shall include training in the teaching of new curriculum frameworks… including participatory decision-making, and parent and community involvement (Massachusetts General Laws, School Committees, M.G.L. 71 § 38Q). School site councils are also responsible for curriculum approval. According to the Massachusetts Law for the Curriculum Accommodation Plan, “A school district shall adopt and implement a Curriculum Accommodation Plan to assist principals in ensuring that all efforts have been made to meet students’ needs in regular education. …The curriculum accommodation plan shall include provisions encouraging teacher mentoring and collaboration, and parental involvement” (Massachusetts General Law, Curriculum Accommodation Plan, M.G.L. 71 §38Q1/2).

The federal and state mandates are designed to have a “trickle down” effect and cause local districts to also create policies to implement these standards in order to receive federal and state funding. In this research, the Roslyn Public School parent involvement policies coincide with the state mandates. As a comprehensive district initiative, “Partnering with families and the community to support student learning” is one of the Essentials of Whole School Improvement (Roslyn Public Schools, 2008a). Among local policy that schools are mandated to implement, each school is to: set aside space for parents; schedule time each week for teachers to contact or meet with parents; respond promptly to questions and requests from parents; communicate regularly with parents in the language spoken in the home; inform parents in a “family-friendly”
format about strategies to improve student achievement at school and at home” (Roslyn Public Schools, 2008b).

In an effort to provide better outreach to families, the district also employs The School Family & Community Engagement Unit that works with individual schools to help organize councils, to plan activities and to augment communication between schools and homes. There are 31 schools that have full-time Family & Community Outreach Coordinators on site, but this does not include the research site. The main goals of the coordinators are to strengthen the relationship between home and school, to build the capacity of parent leadership at the school, and to make schools more welcoming to families (Roslyn Public Schools, 2008d). The district also publishes a parent newsletter, which is mailed to every home five times a year to keep parents abreast on news within the district (Roslyn Public Schools, 2008c).

At the school level, in addition to district outreach, mandates exist for parents to become a part of the school through decision-making organizations (Roslyn Public Schools, 2008c). The School Parent Council’s (SPC) objective is to bring all parents together for the purpose of advocacy and support of high-quality education programs. The SPC is made up of administrators, teachers and parents and is designed to work closely with the School Site Council (SSC) to review the budget and curriculum plans, to sponsor activities, and to fundraise for special school needs. The SSC is designed to review and approve school policies. By mandate, a personnel subcommittee is to be formed for hiring and transfers of teachers (Roslyn Public Schools, 2008g). Finally, there are to be two representatives from the SPC who also serve on the SSC, so that decisions and information gained at School Site Council meetings regarding budget, curriculum and personnel hiring can be communicated to the School Parent Council to further their knowledge and ability to support these policies and programs.
In passing the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and in imposing standards on states and districts, the federal government has taken a clear stand on the obligation to provide high-quality education for all of our children. However, the implementation processes, the monetary compensation and the overall societal priority regarding education have not come to fruition in this country. “Quality public education may be national and state policy, but it is not yet a civil right” (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007, p.1). To ensure that quality education is carried out, therefore, public schools need to engage all the help they can get to raise the quality of education for all students. In today’s standards-based and high-stakes testing educational environment, family and school partnerships must be raised to a new level of understanding, authenticity and focus on student learning. The mandates have been set, but the implementation phase is left to individual schools.

_Schools Need Families and Families Need Schools_

The NCLB Act clearly aims to give parents more input and control over their children’s education and the public education system. While the mandates may be essential for schools, especially in low-income urban areas, there is less clarity about how schools are to implement these programs, about who is responsible at the school level, about where the funding for engagement programs will come from, about the timeframe in which this should happen, and about how schools will be held accountable. Despite this lack of clarification, local level administrators are still left with the task of involving and empowering the parent and family populations of their school. While discrepancies exist in responsibilities and accountability, it is clear that families and schools are now inextricably linked by the legal mandates set to educate all children and to close the existing achievement gap (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987).
These links with parents also have a moral imperative for school personnel to work with parents as the primary educators and advocates for their children. This unification has the potential to support closing the achievement gap (Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007; Ferguson, 2005; Fullan, 2003; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007). Decker, Decker and Brown define the term achievement gap to “describe measurable discrepancies in academic achievement, largely along economic, racial, ethnic lines” (p. 34). These gaps are revealed on high-stakes standardized tests, which clearly show that there is a measurable disparity between low-income and more affluent families, and between minority students (especially African American, Hispanic and Native Americans) and their white and Asian counterparts (Decker, Decker & Brown). But it is clear that educational and learning inequities do not begin in schools (Decker, Decker & Brown; Ferguson), but rather through inequitably funded schools and institutional structures such as tracking and placing low-income, non-native speakers in lower level courses. The opportunity gap continues to widen the achievement gap (Decker, Decker & Brown).

Parents in low-income, urban school districts, especially minority parents, require more, rather than less information and support to become advocates for their children (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2005). Access to information relevant to helping their own children succeed is essential to enrolling them in the correct programs, knowing the resources that are available, and being able to support the child at home. Parental advocacy requires reciprocity from the school. If parents are going to become engaged, they need to know that the school is able and willing to hear their concerns and ideas in order to work together, receive updates, and resolve problems (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies). The term “social capital” (Coleman, 1987) is used to define the resources, information channels and navigation routes that children
need to succeed in school and can be obtained with school support of family involvement. Amid the current economic situation and job market, the need for a higher education degree is not just an asset, but also a necessity for achieving in a career that can support an individual or family. All students need an opportunity to excel in high school in order to gain access and have the skills to succeed in higher education. This preparation begins in middle school and should be within moral obligations and general school goals to provide high academic standards and social supports that allow students the cultural capital they need to navigate educational systems.

In the current high-stakes testing and standards-based education movement in schools, it has been argued that teaching to the whole child in terms of social and emotional development has been replaced by more drilling of academic material. Through efforts to produce high test scores and to meet both federal and state standards, we have lost another essential aspect of school curriculum – the social and emotional skills to prepare students as democratic citizens (Goodlad, 2000). Sergiovanni (1994) writes of schools needing to be referred to as “communities” rather than as institutions or systems for the implication that relationship building, collegiality and motivation as driving forces of schools. "The school itself is not defined by brick and mortar but by ideas and relationships" (p. 223). Comer (1989) similarly argues that in the past, raising children was the community’s job, where every adult the child was in contact with taught values and morals. But our values have shifted to individualism and competition, at the sacrifice of children’s abilities to navigate social situations. Therefore, home-school partnerships have the potential not only to improve academic success, but also to model for children how to navigate relationships, conflicts, and resolutions (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

Schools and families need one another in their mutual quest to educate and help students succeed. The purpose of schools has shifted through the 20th century and the desired outcomes
are no longer the same as they were in the early 1900s. There have been four major shifts in education over the course of the 20th century affecting education today. The first was the period from 1900 – 1920, when the goal was to assimilate immigrant children. The second was from 1920 – 1950, when progressive education gripped the nation. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, universal access became a priority through the Civil Rights Movement and the Education of the Handicapped Act, in which both culturally diverse and specially educated students were incorporated into mainstream schools (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). With global competition, high-stakes testing and the standards movement infiltrating education today, raising the achievement levels of all students is a priority. But if we are going to close the achievement gap and “leave no child behind,” it is important that families and schools work together because neither can do it alone. We must “leave no family behind” to give greater equality and access to high standards of education for all students. Schools have the potential to be the great equalizer of society (Lawrence-Lightfoot).

Why Middle School?

With the most recent wave in districts to convert separate elementary and middle schools back to K-8 schools, at the outset, this research may seem moot. However, the motivation for these conversions is usually economically and politically driven. The failure of middle schools to meet communities’ expectations comes from a lack of proper implementation of the original intent of middle schools, the lack of understanding of the complex developmental stage these students are in, and finally, the lack of success of schools in communicating the essential nature of these three critical transitional years to college success.
History of Middle Schools

Middle schools today derived from the original structure of the “junior high.” This original concept originated in works written by Charles Eliot, the former president of Harvard University, who felt that school programs needed to be shortened in order to be more enriching as well as more effective in preparation for college. The result was that seventh and eighth grades were removed from the elementary school programs and added to the secondary school programs (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1998; Ward, 1982). G. Stanley Hall (1905) added to this conversation by publishing Adolescence, stating that, in addition, students at this age needed individual attention. Lounsbury (1992) has since written that seventh and eighth graders not only need to begin preparation for college, but also a required curriculum attuned to their individual and developmental needs. The first two junior highs opened in the 1909-1910 school year in Columbus, Ohio and Berkely, California (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden; Ward). However, most teachers at this level were transferred high school teachers, not trained in middle school education and developmental needs. In addition, the schools were housed in former high schools, which also attempted to use the same structures and schedules of the high schools they used to be (Lounsbury, 1992).

As a result, by the 1960s, the lack of innovation and the inability to meet the needs of young adolescent students had spurred the “middle school movement,” characterized by interdisciplinary planning, flexible scheduling and student-centered, affective educational programs (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1998). One of the most important contributions was D.H. Eichhorn’s The Middle School, written in 1966. However, through the 1980s, according to Eichhorn, little changed other than the name of “junior high school” to “middle school”. In 1982, the National Middle School Association commissioned a task force to identify elements of ideal
middle schools, and in 1992, *This We Believe* was published and has since been revised and edited (1995, 2005), but always remained a guide for effective middle school practices and principles. In 1989, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development published a report called *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, also with revisions and updates by Jackson and Davis (2000), providing exemplar models of curriculum and social development for middle schools to strive for in their own schools. Finally, in 1990, the National Association of Secondary School Principals published the final and most influential middle level report entitled, *Inside Grade Eight: From Empathy to Excitement* (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden). All three reports either in their original, updated or all versions have alluded to the importance of parent and community connections for the sake of achievement and support during this developmental stage marked by transition, identity seeking, independence, experimentation and growth. Because of the intellectual, physical, and emotional changes taking place, the presence of multiple sets of adult figures not only directly in contact with the child, but also with one another, is essential to the guidance and success of each early adolescent.

**Middle School Students’ Developmental Stage**

Eichhorn (1966) coined the phrase, “transescence” to describe children between the ages of 10 and 14 and the unique period of transition that characterizes them. Research identified several types of developmental transitions, such as: physical changes; sexual and social roles; identity formation; peer approval; independence seeking; experimentation; finding personal morals/values; and moving from concrete to critical thinking (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1998). However, it was not until the Carnegie Council (1995) provided more current knowledge that tested and dispelled previously held myths or stereotypes, that basic understandings of young adolescents became clear. Students trying to determine their own identity and independence
characterize the emotional makeup of the middle school years. They are a critical turning point during which youth develop either positive or destructive habits and behavior. The Carnegie Council (1995) then identified the need for parents, schools and communities to come together to serve this age group in particular.

Multiple levels of development characterize young adolescents as part of this crucial turning point, which affects their educational careers and life choices. The first is their physical growth. Middle school level students develop at varying times among students the same age. This variation in physical growth has implications for their social lives and self-perceptions (National Middle School Association, 1995). Physical changes do not take place in isolation from social, emotional and intellectual changes; however they are at different rates for different students, and have various consequences as a result (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1988). The choices made as related to sexual and drug experimentation potentially lead to more serious consequences such as addiction, disease or teen pregnancy, which greatly affect their ability to pursue and succeed in school.

The second development is psychosocial and predominantly concerns students’ interpersonal relationships with their peers. Peer group identification becomes their most valued relationship. Peer groups evolve and often play significant roles in how students perform academically and view school. They help children in their development of “self-concept.” This age group is known for being self-absorbed not only with regard to their own physical changes, but also in forming opinions and identities (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1988). While families retain primary influence over the establishment of their children’s value system, the effects of social groups are a major concern on identification. Issues of right and wrong, good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate, safe and dangerous are highly impacted by the assertions of peer
groups (National Middle School Association, 1995). Simultaneously, middle school level students are de-identifying with parents and are seeing themselves as more adult-like, while believing that the way parents are treating them is too child-like. This friction causes tensions and conflict, and often, middle school students will have differing opinions from both their parents and their teachers (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden). Despite the pushback, parents and teachers need to remember that these students still need guidance and support from adults while they develop their individual identities and strive to establish themselves as members of society (National Middle School Association). Perhaps one of the biggest challenges to middle schools is that these students are developing differently in time, degree and outcome, so meeting these needs can be difficult. It is important therefore, that communication is clear, honest and frequent between home and school to provide support and guidance.

Finally, students are developing intellectually. For these students though, their academic success is dependent upon whether their other developmental needs are met by those who model, guide and support them (National Middle School Association, 1995). Due to the amount of physical, social and emotional changes taking place for middle level students, a delicate balance must be found by educators. On the one hand, they must be consistently challenging youth for engagement and growth, yet creating structures and supports to ensure success and motivation (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1988). Middle school students reveal a capacity for conceptualizing, higher-level thinking, and consideration of multiple viewpoints. However, because they are in transition from more concrete thinking, it is necessary to consider a more gradual approach that also involves systematic scaffolding to creative thinking and problem solving (National Middle School Association).
Given this unique stage of transitional development occurring over varying lengths of time and degree for multiple students, it is important that schools develop diverse support systems to meet these needs. Among support ideas are guidance counselors, advisory groups, and peer support groups, but there is also the possibility of reaching out to both the parent community and the community at large. When connections are in place from all adults in children’s lives, strong supports can be implemented to aid these numerous developments. This involves both immediate family and active extended family, as well as community groups, health services, youth groups, and churches (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1988). For today’s youth, the message that education matters for their futures must be addressed. Parents and communities can no longer just be involved for fundraising, bake sales and potluck suppers; they must be actively engaged in the issues of teaching and learning, so that they have the information to advocate for their children and to set the same high expectations for their students’ education and future careers (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007).

In the latest Carnegie Foundation update, Turning Points 2000, there is not just a report on social, emotional, and health development concerns, but more is made known about content and curriculum taught in schools to challenge and engage students at this level. This intellectual development stage is crucial as students are honing their critical thinking skills at varying times and levels (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Teachers and parents need to design curriculum and experiences in which experimentation, discovery and differentiated instruction allow students at varying points in their intellectual development to be supported with high-level expectations. This is further exacerbated by the varying experiences that students have at home based on socioeconomic status, race, religion and parent education. It is important that families and schools connect not just to monitor academic progress, but also to forge connections around
opportunities of exposure to healthy learning experiences beyond the school walls and hours (Jackson & Davis). This focus on teaching and learning, with the child at the center, should drive teacher and parent communication today (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). A potential middle school priority in connecting the school to home and the community can be providing the information about available resources in the communities, especially for youth and family health and wellness.

Middle School Impact on Higher Education and Future Success

It is essential for this research that the requirements for graduation from high school are clear: “The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, amended in 1994, mandated the establishment of competency determination of five academic subjects. Pursuant to this law, the Board of Education adopted a passing score of 220 on assessments given in grade ten in two of these subjects, English language arts and mathematics, starting with the class of 2003” (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2008). This means that not only do students and families need to be aware of the course requirements for on-time graduation, but also that students must pass an exam they are given in tenth grade to receive a diploma. While high schools have fewer than two years to prepare students for the MCAS exam in math and English language arts, middle schools have students for the prior three years. Middle schools serve an essential role in preparing students for high school, higher education and beyond academic environments to careers and productive citizenship.

In the most recent report from the ACT (2005), citations include four of its own studies, four U.S. Department of Education studies, and three National Association of Secondary School Principals studies, which all refer to research regarding preparation for college as beginning in middle school. This most recent study confirms previous findings that higher education access,
motivation, preparedness and financial understanding must begin in the middle school years (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). This study has four major findings, all of which either directly state or allude to parent involvement’s crucial role. Recommendation one states: “College readiness should begin in middle school” (p. ix). This finding refers both to motivating students through the establishment of career goals and educational expectations and being knowledgeable about the types of schooling they will need for their own particular careers. Parents must consistently reinforce their college aspirations and expectations for their child in order for students to believe in the opportunity. Students and parents need to know which courses in both middle school and high school will put them on track to meet graduation requirements and for post-secondary training. Knowledge of how standardized testing results, potential extra-curricular and community service activities from both middle and high school affect student access to higher education is important for students and parents to understand. Finally, in terms of long-term technical planning, parents and students need to know what pre-college programs are available, types of college finance planning options and requirements for college admission steps and timelines.

Recommendations two through four, in more detailed statements, refer back to all the information students and parents need from recommendation one. For example, recommendation two states: “Schools should explain to students and their parents the effects of taking a challenging curriculum on their future educational, career and income options” (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005, p. ix). For low-income, urban parents, who themselves may not have obtained a higher education degree, this is a very important step that may seem obvious, but is essential for schools to clearly set out for both parents and students. Recommendation three states: “Schools should use multiple sources of information, including standardized assessments, to help inform
students and their parents of the students’ progress toward college readiness” (Wimberly & Noeth, p. ix). This recommendation refers to the two-way communication that schools and parents need to have in order to best help students raise achievement levels.

While teachers receive professional development training and support from other personnel in understanding high-stakes testing data, this same information is not always presented to parents in ways they can comprehend. Training in preparation to take exams and then interpreting results is a necessary step that schools, especially in low-income, urban areas can take to partner with families in raising student achievement. Finally, recommendation four states: “Schools should work with families to calculate college costs and develop a plan to meet these costs” (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005, p. ix). With the increasing cost of higher education today, many families are overwhelmed at the prospect of paying for college independently, or just do not realize that they need to plan ahead. However, in their position of access to this information, schools should feel obligated to provide a variety of resources for families to help them understand the costs and the available opportunities to pay for higher education. This ACT study alerts schools and school personnel to the fact that many students and families aspire to higher education degrees and stable life careers for their children, but are not properly prepared and able to plan to make this a reality. In low-income, urban schools, personnel can provide structures and supports for both students and parents to more fully understand the planning process to ensure success in meeting future goals. Schools cannot do this alone, but must reach out to parents for their support in both encouraging students’ aspiration and then helping to enable students to actually meet these goals.
What Are Conditions and Types of Involvement to Create School / Family Partnerships?

For the current study, the research regarding why parents choose to get involved and how schools have engaged families is important in understanding both the barriers and variety of ways in which schools have created partnerships with families. In addition, although the research is sparse, specific effective strategies in middle school are discussed.

Factors that Determine Why Parents Get Involved

To empower parents as partners at the middle school level, it is important to decipher what constitutes positive parent involvement and how schools can build the capacity of their parent population. Mandates themselves do not make effective partnerships with schools; they must also have the endorsement of local leaders (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). To build local-level capacity, researchers have sought to define factors associated with involvement. Specifically, in work by Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995, 1997) and Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), four major factors are determined. The first is role construction, which defines parents’ beliefs about their responsibilities in their children’s education. Within this first frame, there is a distinction between parents’ ideas about their responsibilities in day-to-day education, and their overall major decisions. Research has found systematic patterns that link values and behaviors related to role construction with child achievement (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). The second factor is the parents’ sense of efficacy, or whether parents believe that through their involvement, they can have a positive influence. Research has found evidence for ways that schools can help build parental efficacy to increase involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). The third factor, general invitations, demands, and opportunities, refers to parents’ perceptions of how much the school or their children invite them to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey, 1997). The
fourth factor, parents’ life context, has been recently added to the framework, and is similar to the first two factors in its motivational concept (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). This includes family socioeconomic status, parents’ knowledge, skills, time, energy and family culture. These frames not only offer perspective on what schools need to do to understand how to involve parents, they also help to understand the implicit and explicit barriers to involving urban parents. These frames are socially constructed and therefore can be influenced by methods the school uses to reach out to families. Finally, an important aspect to note is that these frames are not solely influenced by parents themselves, but also rely on interacting school personnel attempts to reach parents and to understand parents’ personal motivations.

Regarding role construction, individual parents view their role in their child’s education in varied ways, and are influenced by the history of their own parents’ involvement, as well as by their peers who are raising children simultaneously. This is further complicated by society’s cultural expectation paradox: giving parents the dual goal of raising a child to comply with social norms and communal expectations, while also nurturing individual strengths and characteristics to compete in society today (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1994). This makes involvement a difficult task when families may not understand the significance of their role in their children’s education. Parents from diverse cultures may also have constructed views in which they believe their involvement or attendance at the school would be rude or threatening to a teaching professional (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Minority parents are more likely to defer to their children’s teachers and schools on the subject of education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Often teachers working with minority and low-income families see parents as oppositional, but do not understand their ethnic background and accompanying values (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). More can be accomplished when teachers take cultural background into consideration.
But research has found that when working with families of lower socioeconomic status, it is helpful to focus on the concrete tasks they can do at home to support the academic growth of students (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987). Providing support and encouragement to parents is essential in reconstructing the confidence that their involvement has an impact on their children’s educational outcomes.

In the second frame, efficacy is defined by Bandura’s work (1986) as the individual’s feeling of control over influencing a situation. Both teacher and parents’ sense of efficacy contributes to the amount of involvement in which parents engage themselves (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1992). This may be defined as how parents themselves believe that their involvement can actually influence their child’s educational outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1994). For parents, it is not necessarily about the level of parental schooling, but rather an attitude about one’s ability to obtain resources and to understand what the resources are to offer effective help (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones). Parent efficacy is directly related to the educational activities parents provide at home, volunteering directly at the school, and the amount of communication with the school staff. Educational levels of parents are directly related to the amount of time spent directly helping with homework (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie). Parents with more education tend to have higher perceptions of their own abilities, and therefore higher efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). This is a barrier for many minority and low-income parents who, due to their own lack of education, may not understand how to provide a naturally stimulating environment at home (Davis-Kean, 2005). This is only exacerbated as students get older and a twofold problem occurs. The first issue is that parents may be intimidated by the increased workload and curriculum difficulty. The second is that older students want to be seen as independent and try to push their parents away from getting involved.
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(Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler). It is vital that teachers reach out and validate parents’ knowledge of their children to begin to create effective partnerships between parents and personnel. Also, teachers can encourage parents to believe that they have the ability to be their children’s best advocate, as parents do know their child best.

The third framework, general invitations, suggests that parents really do want to be involved in the school, but often do not feel welcomed by school personnel or by their own child/children. This perceived notion of being unwelcome in schools today comes from either a true lack of general invitations and communication on the school’s part, or from some parents’ previous negative school experience. Negative feelings toward schools result from either involvement in discipline problems, or failure in academic endeavors (Norton & Nufeld, 2002). Specifically, for urban parents, there are issues involving times when the schools ask them to come in for conferences, meetings or programs, or to volunteer, and parents encounter a conflict with their own demanding and often inflexible work schedules (Norton & Nufeld). Therefore, schools and teachers should work to find ways to welcome all parents, but especially those with limited means. Parents are more likely to get involved when the school makes the first initiative to invite them (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Urban schools will need to communicate with families through innovative ways and not just through traditional letters or personal contact; alternate forms of communication such as the phone and e-mail, unconventional places to meet, and meeting times may be necessary. Schools must initiate this and train teachers properly in effective parent communication (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). Furthermore, students at this age are usually the primary communicators to parents from the school, and so their invitations to parents may become less frequent as the child gets older. It is important for schools to create
events in which the school extends an invitation to parents, and students are encouraged to do the same.

In the most recent framework, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) has added the dimension of family contextual factors that make a difference in the disparity of parent involvement from affluent schools compared with those from under-resourced schools. The first dimension of contextual factors is socioeconomic status, and although this does not directly determine parent involvement, the issues associated with it do. Examples of these issues may include inflexible and long work hours, as well as disparities in physical and mental health (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Schools who just assume low socioeconomic status parents do not want to be involved often deny parents access to resources that the school could offer to involve them in decision making. The second dimension of contextual factors is parents’ perceptions of the demands on their time and energy that getting involved at the school requires, as related to work and other family responsibilities. Schools must respect these life choices and assume that parents are doing the best that they can (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997). These contextual dimensions are further complicated by parents’ perceptions of their own personal skills, which shape thinking about whether they can provide a support system for students and the higher demands of curriculum as students progress in grade level (Norton & Nufeld, 2002). This is difficult at a time when young adolescents need the most guidance on study skills. Schools must provide concrete and specific ways for parents to assist at home through consistent two-way communication about what is happening at home and what is expected at school (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). Schools must be respectful and responsive to family culture and the circumstances that are created by it, such as language barriers, varying role constructions, and clashes with home and American values (Hoover-Dempsey et al.).
Relational Trust

This last dimension of Hoover-Dempsey et al.’s (2005) work gives tangible terms to a more intangible concept called “relational trust” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). This term has been coined as meaning the social trust or relationships that determine social exchanges and personal dynamics between the home and school. In their work, Trust in Schools, A Core Resource for Improvement, Bryk & Schneider argue that schools today consist of two tiers – access to quality education versus a lack of access. They believe that all the structural and instructional reforms taking place in school are not enough, and that what is really missing in schools today is social trust. This loss of social trust relates directly to the downfall of urban communities, which today lack neighborhood schools and perpetuate antagonistic feelings between school personnel and families. Relational trust is exacerbated by low socioeconomic conditions and the wide array of cultural, racial and linguistic backgrounds that further divide these two groups’ understanding of one another. Relational trust is understood as particular systems of social exchanges, but with the diversity of family backgrounds and prior experience, “there are few core beliefs to which assets by all members can be automatically assumed” (Bryk & Schneider, p. 17). Without genuine dialogue or appreciation of differing viewpoints, teachers see parents’ goals as impediments, and parents believe teachers fail to appreciate the actual conditions in their homes and neighborhoods (Bryk & Schneider).

The relational trust perspective views the social exchanges of multiple distinct groups with one another, namely students, teachers, parents and administrators interacting with each other. The theory is grounded in the possibility of trust building only when individuals perceive that others are acting in ways that are consistent with their role expectations of that person (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). For this research, I would argue that the expectations of the distinct roles of
adults, namely parents, teachers, teachers with administrative responsibilities and administrators, not only varies based on which parties are interacting, but even more problematic is that these expectations are not communicated or established clearly or consistently. Therefore, the problem of fulfilling them is nearly impossible. Further complicating the situation is the inherent nature in schools of “the context of asymmetric power relations” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 20). There is vulnerability built into every relationship, but when this exposure involves staff members who are not only considered professionals, but also represent the dominant culture, families of minority backgrounds feel inadequate during exchanges, even when a perceived slight may be unintentional. However, relational trust theory is based on the premise that “no single role enjoys complete dominance” and “all parties in school role relations remain vulnerable to each other” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 27). The concept at the core of this current research is that families need schools and schools need families in order to best meet the needs of students.

There are four criteria that must be in place for relational trust to be established in an organization. The first is respect, or the recognition of the importance of each role. The second is competence, or the actual execution of each individual’s role. The third is personal regard for others, or the perception that individuals must perceive others care about them and are willing to extend themselves. The fourth is integrity, or the consistency between words and actions of each individual (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Relational trust theory is based on the premise that in building this concept into an organization with varied human roles, social trust should act as a resource to enhance the mission in four ways. The first is that in human organizations, such as schools, there are always major risks for all participants, but when relational trust is created, the uncertainties and vulnerabilities are reduced through transparency and clarity. The second is that transaction costs are reduced because people trust one another and believe their output will be
exchanged in the near future for input. The third is that understandings of individual role responsibilities are not only clearly established, but also routinely reinforced. Finally, when relational trust is established, the school is infused with the ethical imperative among its members to consistently carry out what is best for students (Bryk & Schneider).

For the purpose of this current research, it is important to note that within the multiple relationships established in schools, the student-teacher relationship has been found to be most essential in elementary schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). But, at this age, the student-teacher trust is based on the parent-teacher trust. Since student relationships are based on adult relationships, student interests permeate throughout all adult social interactions. In contrast, in high schools, peer influences and student population norms are the most influential. For high school reforms, these peer forces must be engaged since student relations are very powerful (Bryk & Schneider). However, what is not clear in Bryk & Schneider’s work is where the middle level of schooling falls. It could be argued, that once again, the middle school is a place of transition, and so trust must be established not only with students as they gain independence and begin to make decisions, but parental trust is still key during this intermediate period.

In Meier’s work regarding the Central Park East Schools in New York City (1995) and then the Mission Hill School in Boston (2002), the emphasis on parent-school relationships and trust never waives from one level of schooling to the next. She also reinforces parents’ trust, at all levels of a child’s education, as needing both elements of personal trust and professional competence. Personal trust refers to the perception that there is genuine caring for the student and professional competence regards the belief in the ability of teachers to effectively educate the child. When collaboration is perceived between home and school, adolescents are able to feel safe and happy, and view schooling as part of a larger unit of adults that challenges them to
exceed their expectations (Meier, 2002). This collaboration should not end at the elementary level. Meier (2002) argues that although the lens from which we view various roles in schools will always differ, “the fences that divide us as parents and teachers won’t ever be entirely removed…but they can be far more permeable for the sake of our children’s learning if we can get a better handle on trusting each other” (Meier, 2002, p. 57). Therefore, until a parent believes that they have a mutually trusting relationship with the school, they are not likely to get involved at the school or even share a sense of trust with their child regarding the school personnel.

**Typologies for How Parents Get Involved**

The reasons *why* parents get involved directly affect *how* they participate in their children’s education and/or at the school. Previous research on the types or levels at which schools should be reaching out to parents may provide insight on how to involve parents in the school community and in the education of all students. The most widely-cited typology is that of Epstein’s (1995) six tiers for comprehensive involvement, which has been primarily researched in elementary schools and in middle class settings. However, a few reviews of the comprehensive levels reveal the ways in which middle schools and schools serving families of low socioeconomic status can apply them to their schools. These levels vary in implementation at individual schools, but all six are cited as necessary for schools to fully partner with families and the community (Epstein). Type 1, *parenting skills*, involves the way in which parents have their own style of parenting at home, and how this affects a child at school. Type 2, *communication*, is how often and how meaningful the parents perceive the communication between themselves and the school to be, both with the classroom teacher and from overall school announcements. Type 3, *volunteering*, is how often the parents are in the school helping in classrooms or with school programs. Type 4, *learning at home*, is the space designated, time
allotted, and emphasis placed by parents on academic activities when the student is not at school. This can be a space to do homework, trips to the library or conversations about what students are learning at school. Type 5, *school decision-making* refers to the regularity with which parents get involved on committees that are consulted for school decision-making. Type 6, *collaboration with community agencies*, explains how much the school reaches out to the resources of the community and invites the community into the school. Of these, the most influential factor on student achievement is *learning at home* (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987). This is particularly notable in urban settings, since these parents are less likely to have the resources or the education themselves to provide this necessary component to their children. It is important that schools communicate and teach parents a variety of concrete tasks they can do at home to support their child’s academic growth, no matter what the age of students may be. Finally, these levels have been created based on dominant cultural values in middle class settings of what positive parent involvement entails. For urban parents, supporting the school in all of these ways may not be plausible, nor may it be how parents perceive their most effective role to be. It is important, especially for families in urban schools, that the schools ask parents what they perceive their role to be and how parents can most effectively participate in order to create more meaningful partnerships.

*Extending Typologies into Middle Schools*

Reviews of research have also presented the particular challenges at the middle school level so that middle schools can adapt to meet the needs of their individual parent populations (Epstein, 1996; Rutherford & Billig, 1995; Sanders, 1999). In Epstein’s (1996) work, she relates her own six levels of involvement as applied to middle schools. In level one, *parenting*, she spoke of the necessity of keeping parents informed about curriculum, programs and information
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that they need during the transition from elementary school and looking ahead to the transition to high school. In level two, communicating, she emphasizes two-way communication, from both school-to-home and home-to-school, as an asset for assisting this developmental social and academic transitional level of schooling. In level three, volunteering, she talks about changing the definition of “volunteer” to mean anyone who supports the students’ schooling or growth at any time and in any place, so that the term is not narrowly defined to what parents do at the school during the school day. Type four, learning at home, is especially pertinent to this age group’s need to have structured time, location and routine for completing homework and projects. Epstein extends this to teachers trying to send interactive rather than individualized homework home, so that parents and students can talk about school and school curriculums using the same set of information. In type five, decision making, she emphasizes the need to train parents to be empowered, meaningful, appropriate, and committed members of the team of people making decisions at the school. In particular, parents should be viewed as a valued resource during their children’s high-stakes transitions and as they navigate more complex curriculum. In type six, collaborating with the community, the potential to increase equity for both students and parents is in their access to resources and programs available in the community. The school has the capability to provide this information. Epstein emphasizes that community collaboration has the potential to have the greatest impact on students in middle school because the community can be used for all the other levels to assist both students and parents with access to resources and information.

But more than just delineating the six levels themselves, Epstein (1996) relates the fact that family and community partnerships are not a separate task for school personnel to take on, but should be incorporated into the regular work of the school. She does this through connecting
each level of family and community partnerships with the twelve characteristics of responsive middle schools as defined in This We Believe (1995) and in the later updated version of This We Believe, And Now We Must Act (2001):

Educators who want to work with young adolescents contribute to a shared vision that stipulates high expectations for all. The school program ensures high support with an adult advocate for every student and partnerships with all the students’ families and communities. Academically, the curriculum for each subject is challenging, integrative, and exploratory. Teachers use varied instructional approaches, assessments, and evaluations within a flexible instructional organization. Students are offered good guidance and programs that promote health and safety. These elements combine to promote all students’ learning in a climate that is inviting, challenging and joyful (Epstein, 1996, p. 46).

In Epstein’s analysis, family and community engagement relates to all of these recommendations, which themselves should be integrated for a receptive middle school and curriculum. It is clear that at the middle school level, all parent partnerships must be linked to student development and transition in multiple ways, namely, socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually. Parent partnerships are further complicated by middle school structures and schedules, which may overwhelm parents and deter their involvement.

Rutherford (1995) addresses the recognition of the obstacles at the middle school level through his “eight lessons learned”. He found that the stakes are high for adults to partner around student development since personal and educational decisions made at this level have serious consequences for students’ futures. Students “wrestle with issues of authority, independence, and changing relationships with their families” (p. 65). Schools must work in conjunction with
families to augment social skills in order to encourage productive and respectful citizenship. Similarly, Rutherford writes about the central role of school, family and community partnerships directed at relationship building. Students benefit from the model of adults working together, even if conflict arises while working towards resolutions (Comer, 2005). Professional school personnel can be an integral part of families learning how better to communicate with their children during these tumultuous years, a time often characterized for parents as challenging to their relationships with their child/children.

Rather than talking around the child, together adults can model how to make students accountable for their own learning, behavior and choices (Rutherford, 1995). Ironically, at this level of schooling, when adult support often traditionally diminishes in order to build student independence, it is actually necessary for guidance to increase. Parents can provide integral information in relation to curriculum by providing background knowledge of children’s strengths and weaknesses as they transition into higher-level thinking and complex content. But with the students’ growing need for autonomy, parental help with academics can become a conflict at home. Middle school level personnel may know ways for families to engage in meaningful learning-at-home activities, teach specific ways to help their child, and offer sessions on how middle school students learn, in order to help parents stay involved in the middle level years (Rutherford).

Brown and Becket (2007) provide the distinction between schools that partner with parents and schools that seek support from parents. In their empirical study of one low-income, urban middle school, Brown and Beckett critiqued Epstein’s six levels due to its reliance on the “support” model approach, in which families are expected to automatically support what the school does. This method is problematic in low-income, urban schools whose students are
primarily minority students with varying cultural beliefs. The issue arises because teachers are mainly middle class, white teachers with philosophies that match the school and district traditions, but are not necessarily familiar with the families’ philosophies. However, when schools partner with parents, potential conflicts arise, which do not necessarily lead to negative outcomes. Challenges often lead to understanding multiple perspectives, finding common ground and ultimately, progress. Only then can decision-making apply directly to the students’ needs (Brown & Becket, 2007).

In using this partner approach, Sanders (1999) researched two low-income, urban middle schools that were attempting to improve home-school relations by working on each of Epstein’s (1995) six levels. These two middle schools hoped to reverse the trend of decline in parental involvement as their children got older by reaching out to parents in unique ways. This study reflects the philosophy of “partnership” with families and the community. Sanders found that when schools engaged an “action team” with the goal of implementing atypical ideas and an attitude of partnership, progress followed, as evidenced by increased participation and satisfaction with their parent involvement program. Productive implementation of family-school partnerships occurred through the re-conception of roles and the use parents’ viewpoints.

*More than Just Typologies -- New Roles and Reconstructions for Authentic Partnerships*

While Epstein’s six levels are most widely cited today, other researchers have sought to define the elements in which parents need to be included for a comprehensive school program to be successful. Comer and Haynes’ (1991) whole-school, ecological approach was studied in two urban elementary schools in which the whole school was involved, the interaction of the social systems within the school were considered, and three years were spent on cultivating new relationships between school personnel and parents. This study concluded that there were three
levels in which parents could get involved: Level 3, *general participation*, is general attendance of programs and conferences alongside communication with the teachers about their children. Level 2, *helping in the classroom*, is sponsorship and support of school programs as measured by the frequency with which parents volunteer their time at the school. Level 1, *parents elected to participate on school planning/management team*, is the direct contribution parents make to decision-making committees. This study provided labels for more general types of parent involvement, but it also looked at perceived roles and current structures more rigorously, and it addressed the socio-ecological issues in urban settings.

Based on Epstein’s work, Manz, Fantuzzo and Power (2004) sought to categorize the six levels into three broader goals for an urban elementary school: home-based involvement is the element in which parents engage their children in school-related work at home; school-based involvement is the contribution made directly to the school and on school premises; home-school connections are the communication avenues taken between school personnel, families and the community. This study suggests that having three broader categories in a low-income, urban setting may make partnership promotion more possible. These broad categories may be more inclusive and attractive to families since parent input would be needed for the creation of specific types of involvement. In addition, the results showed that of the three categories, home-based involvement is most closely associated to student achievement. This has clear implications for the way in which schools can reach out to urban parents to help develop the essential element of the home environment in a child’s education. For parents who cannot get to the school, having a clear understanding of what they can do at home could be a great help. Teachers and administrators need to find ways to promote less traditional forms of two-way communication and mutually trusting relationships for the purpose of clear connections between home and
school for adolescents (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Simultaneously, urban parents need to know how to create and communicate, in conjunction with the school, unified messages of high aspirations and expectations for their children (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997). Such communication is critical as the child begins adolescence (Epstein, 1996; Rutherford & Billig, 1995).

Why is Partnership Hard for Schools and Families to Accomplish?

Despite knowing the importance of the family’s role in student’s schooling, there are a variety of barriers that face schools and families today. These include contextual factors of the district, difficulties facing low-income, urban families, unique structures at the middle school level, deficiencies in teacher training, and high demands on administrators. Taken together, these factors deter schools from making families a priority while simultaneously discouraging families from getting involved at the school.

Current Conditions

In the Roslyn Public Schools, the busing mandates from the 1960s are still enacted today. Although schools are broken into triads based on their location, students are still bused across the city daily. Because children don’t necessarily live in the same neighborhood location of their school, their parents also don’t necessarily live or work near the school. Therefore, students take school buses and public city transportation to and from school, which greatly reduces the number of potential opportunities for parents and teachers to informally meet or talk.

Furthermore, a lottery system allows for elementary school parents to feed into the middle school of their choice. Not having a set of families from one elementary school makes notification to parents and students regarding orientations or meetings more difficult. When there is a “feeder “elementary school, the administrations of both the elementary and middle schools
can work together to notify families of transition events. Orientations are necessary in the transition process for students from elementary school and for recruitment of parents to committees and volunteering at the school. This is more difficult since the Revere sixth graders come from multiple elementary schools within the district (Student Development Counselor, Revere School, personal communication, March 12, 2008).

Simultaneously, teachers and administrators do not necessarily live in the neighborhoods of their low-income, urban schools. The informal meetings of teachers, administrators and parents around the neighborhood at places such as the bank or supermarket, or even at local community events occurs much less frequently when these stakeholders do not reside in the same neighborhood. These types of encounters would provide a more informal setting where parents and school personnel find common ground through the discussion of daily life experiences that involve their children/students (Comer, 1989; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Today, urban schools enroll traditionally low-income, minority students from a variety of cultures, ethnicities, languages, creeds and family situations, while schools still employ mainly middle class, white women (Howey, 2000). These cultural differences are exacerbated by the lack of understanding of one another’s regular life events and make it difficult for parents and school personnel to find a common ground.

In terms of formal meetings, contact between parents, teachers and administrators is limited to three open houses a year, a sixth-grade parent orientation, an eighth-grade graduation and several holiday events each year. These infrequent, formalized meetings are therefore high-intensity both for parents and for school personnel, who often feel tense, nervous and generally uneasy (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). For parents, their own life histories of struggles and tensions in school careers, alongside their hopes, dreams and transferred expectations for their students’
success can make these formalized encounters daunting. For teachers, their own educational histories are compounded by the unofficial prescribed conference format, and the limited amount of time they have in which to give parents an accurate measure of their students’ academic and social performance (Lawrence-Lightfoot). These factors often disguise teachers’ in-depth knowledge and the concerns they have for their students as people, which is so essential for parents to hear (Epstein, 1985; Lawrence-Lightfoot) Both parents and teachers often come away from these experiences disappointed (Lawrence-Lightfoot). The sporadic and formalized contact between teachers and parents is not unique to urban schools, but is exacerbated by socioeconomic struggles, cultural differences and long histories of schools failing to meet the needs of low-income urban students and families.

*Urban Barriers*

The complexity of family arrangements today and the vast sociocultural differences among classroom teachers, children, and families further prevent positive relationships from forming (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). Factors that prohibit urban parents from engagement with their child’s school may include: language barriers; lack of transportation to and from the school; lack of childcare for siblings at home; personal negative associations with school; and feelings of inadequacy in the content areas (Norton & Nufeld, 2002). When schools do not consider parents’ needs, low-income parents often feel removed from the school and begin to develop a competing rather than complementary mentality (Hoover-Dempsey, 1997). Schools can create available alternative means of communication to provide urban parents with more frequent and effective dialogue regarding their children’s education to make urban parents feel accepted (Hoover-Dempsey). Issues around authentic communication and meaningful partnerships happen throughout a child’s schooling from early childhood through high school.
However, schools that do not reach out to parents can be most detrimental for urban families who may begin their children’s schooling with disadvantages.

Difficulties begin through large disparities between school and home environments. During early childhood education, the issue of “school readiness” begins with disparities in the knowledge with which students arrive at school, and the learning gaps only continue to increase as children get older (Ferguson, 2005). Potential contributions to school readiness that can be missing in low-income, urban homes are: “nurturance (expressions of love, affection and care); discipline (responses to behaviors that parents regard as inappropriate); teaching (strategies for transmitting information or skills to the child); language (the amounts and characteristics of verbal communication with the child); and materials (books, recordings and other materials to support learning)” (Ferguson, p. 9). As a result, minority, low-income, urban students may begin school behind their peers on many levels. However, Jeynes (2005) found that the most important influences in urban settings on students’ success were parental styles and expectations set for children by their parents. The findings indicate that if parents are successful in providing emotionally stable and stimulating environments at home, the lack of financial resources and educational levels is minimized (Davis-Kean, 2005). This suggests that there exist more subtle ways in which parents influence their children other than the more direct factors such as their level of income, their years of schooling, or their ability to directly engage in students’ academic work. Finally, parents may have their own personal negative histories associated with schools, teachers and administrators in general, not with the particular school at which their child is enrolled (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). These personal biographies may cloud their ability to set their own issues, shortcomings, or negative experiences with schools aside from their child’s current experiences, preventing them from attending school events or communicating more
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regularly. This barrier may begin to be overcome when teachers communicate regularly with parents and provide both positive and constructive feedback that reflects individual knowledge of the students’ abilities (Lawrence-Lightfoot).

*Middle School Structures*

Issues of involvement tend to become exacerbated as children get older and parents tend to become less involved. Parents withdraw their involvement for several reasons: they want to build their children’s ability to be independent; middle schools tend to reach out to parents less frequently; parents become more resistant to involvement due to a lack of understanding of the learning material (Jackson & Cooper, 1992). Studies in high schools have shown that despite increased age or desire to teach independence, communicating common expectations and bridging relationships between parents and teachers creates the most positive outcomes for students (Clark, Shreve & Stone, 2004; Jackson & Cooper, 1992). As a result of more demanding academics and social factors, higher levels of schooling intensify issues for students. Instead of adults granting more independence, they may need to reach out to support their children/students more often. First, the most important factor for a student who grew up in poverty, and “made it” despite hardships is that they had a caring adult in their life as a role model, whether it was a teacher, counselor or coach. Second, these students are successful when there is community involvement and extended services to families outside of school hours. Third, there must be collaboration among all these adults to ensure student success. Finally, parent involvement is most successful when school expectations match parent aspirations and values, for united messages to students from all adults in their life regarding their education (Clark, Shreve & Stone, 2004).
Due to middle school structures where students change classes frequently, parents are unsure about who may be the most appropriate person to contact at their child’s school. This issue exemplifies the “social capital” concern in that parents may not create relationships with the teachers. Additionally, there is a “cultural capital” matter of understanding the delineation of responsibility within the system parents to contact when needed. In addition, each year in middle school, students have a whole set of new teachers, and navigating this system can be daunting for parents. This can be equally frustrating for teachers, who have new sets of multiple classes of students each year. Furthermore, the three years of middle school may not be enough time for parents and administrators to build mutually trusting and respectful relationships. However, the research done by Clark, Shreve and Stone (2004) and by Jackson and Cooper (1992) points to the relationships between students and the adults surrounding them as crucial to their success in middle school.

*Lack of Teacher Training in Parent Involvement*

As teacher professionalism has increased, the simultaneous reduction of the “community influence” of parents, especially poor and immigrant parents, on public schooling has led to further divides between families and schools (Bauch & Goldring, 1998). Schools have worked hard to create a professional school culture through “highly-qualified teachers” and ongoing, on-site, highly focused professional development, with the intent to increase respect for teachers and raise overall expectations of teacher pedagogy (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994). While teachers are privy to more authority and professional degrees, it is important to remember that “when we walk into a school and see parents and teachers working together, in all sorts of roles, it’s a sure sign that the school challenges the very best in students and helps all, regardless of race, class or culture, to realize their fullest potential” (Comer, 1997, p.3). As teacher levels of schooling and
professional development have changed, training in why and how to partner with parents as the primary educators of their children has been ignored. This is especially notable in under-resourced neighborhoods where teachers may not perceive parents as caring, capable or willing to get involved (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005; Groulx, 2001; Shumow, 2000; Wadsworth, 1990).

The training of teachers is a multilayered issue. It involves changing teacher perceptions of low-income, urban students, employing proper training for working with diverse families, and adjusting traditional parent engagement practices to more atypical or innovative levels. First and foremost, changing perceptions of teachers’ beliefs about low-income, urban, minority parents is necessary. Without shared beliefs and values among school personnel regarding the importance of parent involvement, actual implementation of practices is not possible. Teachers should first realize the cultural, economic and contextual issues facing the families they teach in order to better understand what parents need (Griffith, 1998). This preparation should begin at the University level, both in coursework and in realistic placements for pre-service teaching in urban areas to prepare student teachers for the challenges ahead (Griffith). It continues at the school level with ongoing professional development for teachers to gain ideas for best practices. In both settings, teachers report inadequate preparation to work with parents (Whitney, Golex, Nagel & Nieto, 2002). Second, teachers must recognize the unequal power relationships that exist in order to understand the main barrier that parents face in getting involved (Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Teachers could benefit from reaching out to parents first, and seeing them as experts on their children to gain further understanding of students (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Third, teachers should understand that parent involvement is not defined by one specific type of engagement. If teachers stay within the traditional forms of conferences and open houses, they are not going to
form authentic and meaningful relationships with parents to build more equitable programs for students (Becker & Epstein, 1982). The practices that teachers employ to partner with parents must be varied and based on what parents and teachers can do together to meet student needs (Epstein, 1982).

These current barriers can be overcome with an understanding of the importance of training both at the University and school district level. Epstein & Sanders (2006) researched SCDE (Schools, Colleges, and Departments of Education) leadership to understand the preparedness of graduates. This study showed that significant increases in courses offered, research conducted, and exposure during coursework have occurred over the last ten years. Simultaneously, the leaders are aware of the need for continued efforts to train graduates in parent and family engagement, especially around the “spheres of influence” that students must navigate in order to be successful. The transition to full partnership with parents seems to take place when teachers no longer perceive sole ownership of the school without the families, and simultaneously, parents begin to feel ownership of their child’s school with pride (Brown & Beckett, 2007). Most notable in these findings was the recognition that leaders at the university and school district level must set teacher preparation for family engagement as priority, be the change agents, and guide universities toward understanding the emerging theories and usefulness of interactions and collaborations with families (Epstein & Sanders).

The Need for Urban Leadership

In reviewing SCDE leadership, there was an equal understanding that school administrators, as well as teachers, need training in order to lead schools, set the tone and be creative in whole school practices (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Administrators in urban districts are inundated with the task of meeting state standards and raising scores on standardized tests to
avoid punitive action by the federal government. Therefore programs and partnerships, which take significant amounts of time and energy, often get lost in daily priorities (Andrews & Moorefield, 1991). However, it is the responsibility of schools, led by their principals, to find ways to expand the roles of parents so that they feel empowered to work in partnership with teachers, rather than in conflict and tension (Andrews & Moorefield, 1991; Fullan, 2003). This change might occur through the principals changing the cultural context in which their schools operate. When leaders change the context, they change behaviors. Adjusted norms of behavior lead to school culture that is based on high standards for everyone and on common, rather than individual, goals for their schools (Fullan). Until a culture of trust around the unifying goal of educating all children is reached, authentic partnerships cannot be created (Birrell et al., 1998). This ultimate goal of raising achievement through the focus on students should be the unifying factor for parents and school personnel (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). This priority is set by the leader to invigorate the whole school community. Sergiovanni (1994) refers to this shift in whole school culture from an institution to a community, terminology that implies collegiality, reciprocity and mutual respect. When school leaders define this environment as integral to the school, a complete role and responsibility reconstruction among the school community members may take place.

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

What Do “Partnerships” Look Like in Low-Income, Urban Schools?

Despite the model that many suburban districts could provide to low-income, urban
schools, the multitude of contextual factors that affect urban school decision-making warrants a
close look at studies completed in similar settings. While low-income, urban elementary schools
have differing schedules and number of teachers in contact with students, findings from these
studies provide understanding of the role re-conceptions and whole-school dedication to creating
these partnerships. Although high school students are of an independent age, advocate for
themselves, and do the majority of communicating between home and school, high school
studies exemplify the need for adults to come together for students of all ages. Finally, the sparse
urban middle school studies provide insights for the current study to consider in direct relation to
middle school structures and contextual issues.

*Elementary Schools*

The necessity of evaluating elementary school studies stems from the significant amount
of research on parent involvement that has been done in elementary schools. Although there has
been a great deal of research that evaluates particular programs that best engage urban
elementary school parents, for this study, the focus will be on how schools reconstruct roles and
responsibilities. This type of research seems to be missing from middle school evaluations of parent partnerships, but we might gain valuable insights from elementary school studies.

Kratzer (1997) presents an ethnographic case study of one elementary school in which the researcher sought to evaluate the cultivation of a caring community in a low-income, urban, public school over the course of one year. The findings suggest that there is a relationship between school culture and student achievement. Furthermore, the positive school culture cultivated in this situation was derived from the whole school community, namely administrators, teachers, and parents. Throughout the year, the climate of mutual trust and respect was formed from an ethic of caring in which there is a school-wide sense of ownership and responsibility. The students themselves were the center of the community. This school focused on the inclusion of all stakeholders in building relationships whose focus was solely on school effectiveness, even more than on the implementation of its parent involvement programs. The definition of “effective” was expanded to include not only test scores, but also more broad focus on student learning with the link between achievements of the individual based on the success of the group.

In another qualitative case study, Abrams & Gibbs (2000) evaluated school reform longitudinally during each year of a three-year plan on the actualization of goals to inform practitioners. After just one year, participants found implications for the continuation of the school reform because development of cooperative relationships between school staff, parents, and other community members had been accomplished. Among their findings, the most significant to this study was the need to facilitate a new understanding of roles. This collaborative model that many low-income, urban schools are seeking relies on significant input from parents and community members, yet staff members are unprepared for this paradigm shift.
Without preparation and training for working with diverse sets of stakeholders, staff will continue to make community members feel like outsiders or subordinates, and this denigration of groups leads to more antagonistic elements of school-family-community partnerships.

Simultaneously, among the findings, Abrams and Gibbs also suggested that the limits of power sharing are set clearly from the start. This collaboration does require role and responsibility shifts, but does not necessitate the undermining of the authority and professional status of administrators and teachers.

Comer and Haynes (1991), in their nine-element, three-to-five-year ecological approach to developing parent involvement programs, found that for these initiatives to be successful, the process needs to support children’s total development, termed “psycho-educational development” (p. 276). Their findings suggest that parents from even the most stressful family and community circumstances can become engaged when whole school reforms enable parents to get involved, as they are comfortable and able. In other words, differing levels of responsibility are available, and meaningful roles that support the school exist. They also suggest that a clear focus on developing what this looks like at a school could take three to five years of purposeful planning. Therefore, the implication for these programs to transfer success into middle schools is difficult since the complete turnover of parents happens every three years.

In similar findings of a three-to-five-year approach, Epstein’s (2005a) qualitative study evaluated the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) model to suggest the attributes and elements that made this method successful. Similar to the other three elementary studies, this research did not focus on program implementation, but rather on a whole-school reform of roles and relationships to more meaningfully involve parents and the community in the school. This study yielded results that focused on the implementation process termed “transitioning,” which
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requires data, discussion and decisions to select proper components that enable educators to sustain this form of school improvement. The finding regarding implementation has significant implications for middle-school success, given that within a three-year period, the action team must simultaneously determine proper components and transition strategies since this is the same timeframe a given set of students is enrolled at the school.

What can be derived from all four of these studies is that a school’s approach to partnering with families and their communities cannot take place without an evaluation and reconstruction of roles and responsibilities. These discussions and approaches also take significant amounts of time and require open and honest communication between the school staff, parents, and community members. Finally, the central role of all work should remain around the union of stakeholders for the common goal of student learning and development.

High Schools

Although this study is not based on high school parent involvement, looking at some successful partnership programs in high schools could be argued as more fitting “transfers” into the middle schools. This is due to the structure of classes, times of year when parents are invited to the school, and the central role that decision making committees play at both these levels.

Clark, Shreve and Stone (2004) evaluate the “Taking Stock in Children” program, which uses collaboration to promote the success of low-income, urban students in secondary school and helps students enroll in higher education. This study involves programs in schools with families of diverse cultural backgrounds and in areas of poverty. The four findings concluded contribute to the knowledge base of secondary student success: caring adults (parents, teachers, mentors or community agency staff) being active in the students’ lives; community involvement occurring at the school; collaboration of adults in students’ lives; parental involvement, even if limited to at-
home support and expectation-setting. In this longitudinal study, these four elements yielded the most successful results for secondary students in low-income, urban areas. All four have an element of overlap, but have the most influential affect when the community (parents, community agencies, and the school) comes together.

In research by Jackson and Cooper (1992), this complicated task of involving parents in urban high schools is further confirmed. In studying two comprehensive movements to involve parents in two schools, one in the Bronx and one on Staten Island, they found that there are two major steps that must be taken at the secondary level. The first is to determine the needs of parents at this level. Schools tend to believe that parents have parenting skills and understandings of their children by this point. In actuality, raising teenagers yields a new set of conflicts and uncertainties, so schools first need to reach out to find out what supports parents need or to offer specific skills in general. Second, schools need to make it clear to parents what the schools themselves need from them. Despite parents having worked with other educational institutions, high schools have different demands, course offerings and available programs. In addition, the support the school needs at home may vary.

It is clear from all of the studies discussed above that schools should reach out to involve parents more, rather than less, to meet the varying and often dramatic needs of adolescents. Similar to the elementary school studies, high school research was also not directed at particular programs in which causal results were measured; rather they were based on relationship-building between parents and children, parents and teachers, and teachers and children, as well as on the constant state of communication between all parties. Although teenagers often resist adult relationships, students of this age need adult support more than ever.
Middle Schools

Finally, the studies conducted in actual middle schools are few, but have obvious implications to the study at hand. Practically speaking, qualitative studies done in two urban middle schools by Sanders (1999) yielded the importance of implementing action teams at this level specifically to overcome structural barriers at the middle school, as well as to plan, implement and evaluate initiatives the school takes to connect to the homes and community of its students. In addition, survey research by Xu (2004) in a large urban middle school (grades six through eight) and in a larger rural secondary school (grades five through twelve) suggests that despite student age, middle and secondary school youth still benefit greatly from the clear expectations and adult guidance of homework. Significant to these findings is that the educational background of the homework helper does not matter; rather it was more important that students were supervised in developing a routine, finding a quiet space to work, and mandating time to complete homework. Both studies suggest the importance of building relationships and having adults send clear messages about the importance of school and learning. Parents, therefore, may need neither specific skills nor a specific educational background in order to make a difference in their child’s education.

Similar findings were derived in quantitative research by Singh (1995), in which four elements were evaluated regarding parental involvement for grade eight students. The first was parental expectations, or the academic prospects parents have for and share with their children. The second was engagement in school programs and activities. The third was parent communication with children about school. The fourth is home structure, which promotes learning, or the space, time and energy devoted to creating an academic environment at home. The data were collected in 1988 from a national database and were used to test the model of the
listed components. The research found that parental expectations have the greatest effect on student achievement and communication about school had a moderate effect. Interestingly, home structure had a negative effect, which could be due to the “autonomy vs. control struggle” characteristic of the age of these students. Meanwhile, parent participation in school events had no effect. Also notable are the questions that this study raises regarding age-specific effects of parent involvement. These findings show that parent aspirations and communication with children about school are more important than parent engagement at actual school events or programs. This result complements the fact that middle school students desire autonomy in their school environment, which suggests the limited role parents may play directly at the school based on children’s invitations.

In quantitative survey research by Hoge (1997) in sixth and seventh grades, four elements were also evaluated regarding types of parental involvement impacting students’ school achievement. The first was family process factors, or expectations of the academic prospects parents communicate to their children about their education. The second was interest, or how often parents engage in dialogue about school. The third was parent involvement at the school, or the amount of time parents directly volunteer or attend school events. The fourth was parent-child communication, or the level and amount of conversation taking place between parents and children about school. The research concluded that parental expectations about student achievement had the most influential effect on student outcomes, especially with parental aspirations for student achievement in specific domains. These conclusions are in agreement with Singh’s (1995) findings that the level of communication between parents and children about educational aspirations has more of an effect on middle grade students than the amount of time a parent spends at the school or parents’ own educational background.
Ramirez (2004) used a mixed-methods approach to studying a parenting skills program called “PASSport,” in one urban middle school summer session. The findings have implications for helping parents to develop their self-confidence in making a difference in their young adolescents’ education. After an eight-week parent educational program, which enabled parents to personally learn study skills and to effectively teach these same skills to their children, parents had found better ways to communicate with their children and to build a positive relationship. This progress was measured by responsiveness of children to parents when asked about schooling. In addition, parents’ success was measured by assertiveness when speaking about education with both their children and with educators. This made parents more productive advocates, who could ask the right questions and elicit more meaningful responses. Finally, parents were better able to look more critically at their own home environment and attitudes toward schooling to become clearer in their own parenting roles.

This need to teach parents the advocacy skills to become active partners in their children’s education, rather than just passive supporters of their children’s school, was studied by Brown and Beckett (2007) as a necessary element to involving low-income, diverse background families. Although this qualitative case study was completed in an alternative middle school, the findings reveal the powerful effect relationship building has on the school community. The Beckett and Brown study took on the biggest barrier that urban schools often feel about parent involvement: communicating with individuals from a variety of socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Their research also contends that most parent involvement practices today are based on the “support model” in which parents are expected to support the work of teachers at home and at the school. However, to overcome great barriers, this school took on a twofold “partnership approach” in which not only did teachers and parents partner to build a
strong school community, but they also built a home-school-community priority that immersed everyone in a total learning environment. The combination of the partnership model and the focus on teaching and learning seems to be most effective not only in low-income, urban schools, but especially at the middle school level, where young adolescents need models of both high academic standards and productive relationship-building techniques. These results have direct implications for the current study.

Schools and teachers must remain committed to communication with parents about their children’s learning, and to be able to provide concrete ideas for the ways in which parents can support this learning at home, especially as the academic curriculum standards are raised and social/emotional risks for urban middle school students increase. In Smith’s (2002) survey of middle school teacher perceptions of parent involvement, findings suggest that although teachers wanted more parent involvement, the options they proposed were not perceived as “meaningful” to parents. From this, we can infer that schools should ask parents what they need, attempt to understand the roles parents believe that they hold, and understand the contextual barriers for their particular parent population (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). This study also suggests that parents and teachers could engage in more consistent and meaningful conversations to understand each other’s motives and beliefs, so that cultural differences and interests can be recognized and systematic supports can be implemented around the united goal of student learning and development (Ferguson, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

What Components of the Existing Literature Frame the Current Study?

Although all the research discussed up until this point is relevant background on the literature surrounding parent involvement, the following sections will review fields of literature
of particular importance to the current study and the individual school where the research will be conducted.

Social Capital

Research has shown that a large disparity exists between low-income youth and middle-to-upper class youth in their ability to use social capital from their parents to build their own human capital (Coleman, 1988). Lareau and Shumar (1996) claim this is especially significant when federal and state mandates create policies and base funding on “parent involvement,” but have largely ignored the observable differences in parents’ and guardians’ compliance with educational policy based on social resource differences. Furthermore, parents approach schools with differing perspectives on what constitutes helpful and supportive involvement. Research by both Kahne and Bailey (1999) and Stanton-Salazaar (1997) show that through institutional support from schools themselves, the large disparity in social capital used to navigate school systems can be overcome. This research is based on the premise that when parents are given access to cultural and social capital, this information can be transferred to students to more effectively navigate school systems and ultimately to achieve access to desired career paths.

Schools have a moral obligation to help families and students gain access to information channels and supports that can promote more success in school, access to higher education or vocational training and, ultimately, towards productive citizenship. This has major implications at the middle school level, as the middle school years constitute a time when families need to choose high school paths that begin to prepare students for college or vocational training. Families need assistance to define their own and their children’s aspirations, gain the necessary academic supports, and explore their options for financing (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005).
**Parental “Soft Skills”**

Taken from the business world, the term “soft skills” in this case refers to less cut and dry demographics such as parents’ levels of education, success in school, and socioeconomic status as the sole factors to determining their children’s achievement. Although these have been found to be factors, it is more important for students’ success that parents overcome personal hardships through the use of their “soft skills”: communicating aspirations; setting expectations of a work environment and schedule at home; continuing to stay active in their children’s social and emotional growth; and building relationships with the school and in the community to obtain resources.

An example of the particular importance of soft skills comes from Stevenson, Chen & Uttal’s (1990) qualitative study comparing interviews regarding role perceptions with Caucasian, Black and Hispanic mothers of elementary school aged children. All the mothers believed very deeply in the value of education and in their own children’s abilities. However, both the Black and Hispanic mothers emphasized more things that the school could be doing, such as longer school days and more homework, to further the achievement of their students. They believed less in their own abilities to assist their children. For urban parents, there is a disjuncture between understanding their role as primary educators of their children and their own efficacy in influencing their children’s academic achievement. Therefore, allowing parents to act as the primary educator may require schools to make parents feel more included and help them to understand their potential role in their children’s education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

**Teachers’ and Administrators’ Beliefs and Preparation for Parent Partnerships**

Authentic partnerships will require both the administrators and the school personnel to be trained in various types of involvement, theories of engagement, and reaching out to parents. But
perhaps more important is the attitude the school has toward these partnerships. Parent engagement cannot be viewed as one more item on the yearly checklist, but must be an underlying attitude that is encouraged and practiced to increase the staff’s ability to properly teach students. Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992) refer to this as “Funds of knowledge for teaching” (p. 132). This work relies on developing innovations in teaching based on the knowledge and of students’ home lives, community resources and cultural backgrounds. This understanding may provide more in-depth knowledge of students’ backgrounds. With positive information, teachers can more effectively utilize the home and community as a resource to raise student achievement. This relates to Epstein’s “spheres of influence,” which remind educators of the three areas students navigate daily: the home, the school and the community. For educators, thinking of the home as a fund of knowledge creates an opportunity for partnership, in which both the home adjusts to the school procedures and curriculum, while the school also adjusts to home practices, culture and understandings of the child’s strengths and weaknesses.

*Whole-School Initiatives to Promote Partnership over Support*

There is a need for schools to create whole-school initiatives that encourage teachers to build their own efficacy by consistently creating partnership relationships with parents (Comer & Haynes, 1991, 1993; Epstein, 2005a; Hoover-Dempsey, 1987; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004). Unfortunately, there are few programs that have been created to systematically incorporate families and the community into the schools (Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004). However, in one qualitative case study, Comer and Haynes (1991) found that elementary school parent involvement programs are most effective when they include an integrated, ecological approach to school enhancement. In Comer and Haynes’ study, the schools recognized three distinct levels in which parents get involved, based on their level of comfort. In turn, staff acknowledged that
there are important and meaningful responsibilities at each of these levels and that parents must be recognized at all levels. This positive recognition helps maximize the number of parents involved in the overall school community.

In a review of a centralized approach to reaching elementary school children with diverse backgrounds in urban settings, Haynes and Comer (1993) researched the School Development Program (SDP), a program conceived as a systematic process to target the entire school for change. In this study, with the initial foundation of a whole-school approach, the researchers found success with everyone working toward a common goal. The mechanisms employed include: a school planning and management team, which involves parents; a mental health team to address student and staff issues, and a parent group that involves parents in every facet of school life. The three operations employed were: a comprehensive school plan that delineates social and academic goals; staff development that addresses specifically outlined objectives, and monitoring and assessment that generates useful data on processes and outcomes. The three principles they operated by were: a no-fault approach to problem solving; decision by consensus with attempts at cross-fertilization of ideas, and collaboration with, rather than paralysis of the principal or any individual. Both of the above studies recognize the importance of incorporating parents into the school decision-making process, and understand that doing so will involve an effort to appreciate what parents need and what they can realistically give. This allows the parents and school personnel to work in partnership, rather than as a hierarchical, one-way line of communication.

In Sheldon and Van Voorhis’ (2004) comprehensive, longitudinal regression analysis, the most important factor that helped make these school-community-family programs high in quality was the consistent reflection on and evaluation of the plans, activities, successes and failures. At
all levels, the need for different types of involvement to be recognized, implemented and evaluated is needed. Especially at the middle school level, there is a need to create strong ties between the school, the families and the community to support the unique developmental and transitional needs of adolescents (Sheldon & Van Voorhis). We can no longer afford to have schools and parents operate in opposition to one another when the goal, success for students, is a common one. Despite the array of research on parent involvement, there is a gap to be filled for common understanding of perceived adult roles and responsibilities to unite for what is best for students.

What is the Bottom Line?

Research has identified barriers that schools in underserved neighborhoods need to work through as well as the potential benefits of parent involvement. The research also illustrates how certain schools that have made parent involvement work by partnering with parents to determine what role they want to take, what support they need and what an ideal home-school-community partnership would mean for their children. The problem is that most research has been done in elementary schools. The studies done in middle schools either target a particular type of program or review the literature in elementary schools and make recommendations for middle schools. Research at individual low-income urban middle schools that are already striving to improve student learning is a natural next step so that partnering with parents around student achievement can begin. The triangulation of perspectives from parents, teachers and administrators is needed to create authentic partnerships in low-income, urban middle schools to close the achievement gap and provide educational opportunities to all students.
Summary/Preview

This chapter sought to evaluate and critique the current literature surrounding school-family-community partnerships in low-income, urban areas. A paradox exists between the generalized mandates at the federal and state levels, and what is really needed at the local level to create meaningful parental and community involvement to raise student achievement. Research has shown that while there are some common themes to partnering with parents, the most productive schools have formed teams, created short- and long-term goals, and sought multiple stakeholders to develop comprehensive school-wide initiatives to involve families and the communities in these particular schools. In chapter three, the methodology of the current study is described and is used to gain the perspectives at the local level of administrators, teachers and parents at one low-income, urban middle school to give voice to those closest to students. Through developing an understanding of what authentic and meaningful partnership would look like at this level and for this school, research findings will yield insights that may potentially produce deeper understandings of parent involvement for the purpose of creating more meaningful partnerships at one low-income, urban middle school.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

This study aims to assess the roles and responsibilities as understood by parents, teachers and administrators regarding parent involvement in one low-income urban middle school. Using the data that has been collected, my goal is twofold: the first is to more effectively promote productive school and family partnerships; the second is to utilize these improved relationships in order to raise student achievement in one low-income, urban middle school. A qualitative study was critical, since there is scant research on the understanding of the beliefs and values these three stakeholders hold with regard to their own participation in students’ education. Creswell (2005) defines qualitative research methodology as “used to study research problems requiring: an exploration in which little is known about the problem” (p. 45). There is an abundance of research on how to define positive parent participation (Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey, 1987), how to implement it in elementary schools (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Davis-Kean, 2005; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Epstein, 1985a, Epstein, 1985b, Epstein, 2005a; Griffith, 1998; Kratzer, 1997; Manz et al., 2004), how to characterize the ideal actions of administrators, teachers and parents (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, 1995; Hoge, 1997; Manz et al., 2004; Singh, 1995), and how to identify generalized approaches to parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Stevenson, Chen & Uttal, 1990). However, it is still unclear how the perceptions of these roles affect what actually transpires at the middle school level. Research does exist regarding programs and strategies to involve parents in middle school (Epstein, 1996; Friedlander, 1999; Hoge, 1997; Ramirez, 2004; Singh, 1995; Smith, 2002), but there is little known about how perceptions affect implementation at the local school level. Therefore, a
qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study because “the purpose statement and research questions are general and broad” and “seek to understand the participants’ experiences” (Creswell, 2005, p. 47).

**Research Questions**

It is within this research agenda that I have studied the following questions:

1. What are parents’, teachers’, and administrators’ perceptions of the appropriate role of parent involvement in low-income, urban middle schools for efforts aimed at raising student achievement?

2. From these three points of view, what factors impact parent involvement aimed at raising student achievement in low-income urban middle schools?

3. How do perceptions of appropriate parent roles influence what transpires, or not regarding student achievement at the school?

From these questions, inferences regarding what schools can do collectively to more effectively promote partnerships, as a means to enhance student achievement, have arisen and are included in the implications section of chapter five.

Before continuing with the specific methodological choices and the underlying theoretical frameworks, an understanding of the pilot study, which has driven the current research questions and basic ideologies of this study, is essential.

**Pilot Study**

In my work as a principal intern for the 2007-2008 school year in one Roslyn public middle school, I was disappointed by the lack of parental involvement. During informal conversations, it became clear that contextual issues of busing, structural issues of students
having multiple teachers, and the basic overloading of administrators’, teachers’ and parents’
schedules were all factors in the lack of regular parental presence. However, when I researched
how middle schools have successfully engaged parents, I was surprised to find that studies
conducted solely in middle school were sparse. Rather, most research acknowledged that
parental participation declines as children get older (Epstein, 1986; Griffith, 1998), yet it also
maintained that middle schools should be incorporating practices of parent involvement that
were tested in elementary or high school sites, sometimes with a few middle schools included to
generalize findings (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Sheldon & Van Voorhis,

I realized that I needed to make informal insights I gained through conversations,
observations, and my work in leading the parent council more structured and deliberate to
understand the unique barriers that faced the school and families at the middle level. Therefore, I
conducted a pilot study based on the research question: “What are the unique barriers affecting
urban parent involvement in middle schools?”

My pilot study consisted of three semi-structured interviews, one with a parent, one with
a teacher and one with a school administrator. I also used observations from three parent council
meetings (February, March and April; Spring 2008) and analyzed artifacts collected from these
meetings, which included documents--namely, agendas and minutes. The results were primarily
based on the interviews, but confirmed by both observations at meetings and by analysis of
artifacts collected. The original intent of the pilot study was to complete a smaller version of
what would ultimately become my dissertation research. However the insights that I gained
through tentative findings shifted the aim of this current research.
The pilot study results suggest the need for parent engagement, involvement, participation and empowerment to be viewed in different ways in order to be effective at this level of schooling. The data from the pilot study were coded with 33 first-order/single-text codes (Creswell, 2005), which were then chunked by redundancy and similarity into eight major themes (Creswell). For the purpose of the current study, three themes emerged that tentatively confirm existing literature regarding barriers to parent involvement, and three themes suggested individual contextual barriers at this particular school. Taken together, this data contributes to an understanding of how values and beliefs affect what transpires with regard to parent-school partnerships. Two additional themes emerged which drive the current study and suggest common understanding by parents, teachers and administrators about parent roles at the middle school level. However, although these responsibilities were agreed upon, no one is actually following through/taking action, suggesting a further lack of understanding and communication between stakeholders regarding these perceived roles. Tentative pilot study findings are discussed below for clarity of purpose of the current study.

**Confirmation of the Existing Literature**

The three themes, already found in existing literature, suggest confirmation of barriers to parent involvement: *students’ age, parent demographics, and parent association of school as negative*. *Students’ age* refers to this particularly difficult developmental stage during which these students yearn for independence and peer approval instead of family engagement. *Parent demographics* refers specifically to the barriers confronted by young, low-income, urban parents, who may be lacking parenting skills, or to the cultural diversity of parents who have differing perceptions of their role in their children’s education. *Parent association of school as negative* is another barrier found in the literature that is usually associated with low-income,
urban parents. It suggests that parents’ own negative feelings and experiences of schools affect their attendance and participation in their children’s schooling. Having found themes that already exist in the literature confirms that by just identifying barriers, the current research would not further low-income, urban middle school parent involvement literature? However, these three themes imply that more research is needed to understand parents’ perceived understandings of their own roles and to question whether these views can be reconciled with the schools’ notions of parent engagement.

Contextual Issues

At this particular school, three contextual factors tentatively indicate particular structural barriers that will be noted throughout the current study. These themes are labeled scheduling, not a neighborhood school, and the need to use parents as assets. Scheduling refers to the “early schedule” (7:20am until 1:30pm) this Roslyn Public middle school is assigned by the district. These unusually early hours leave working parents in a predicament regarding drop-off and pick-up of their children, and often force families to use school busing or even public transportation. The lack of informal meetings between teachers and parents during drop-off and pick-up further exacerbates the lack of consistent contact they have with one another. Since the district employs “busing” and “school choice lotteries,” families of middle school students often do not reside in the neighborhood of the school. For some families, lack of transportation and distance from the school eliminates the possibility of holding open houses or meetings at the school, which ties in to “not a neighborhood school.” Finally, the need to use parents as assets, emerged from all three stakeholders, and suggests the desire to have parents communicating with one another, running more events, and using parent talents as a resource. However, these ideas have never been implemented by the school or initiated by parents, therefore structures have never been put
into place for this to happen at the school. For this study, knowing these specific contextual issues is important in order to fully understand both the beliefs and the behaviors enacted by stakeholders regarding school-family partnerships.

_Emerging Themes Driving the Current Study_

Finally, driving the current study are two tentative themes that emerged and are labeled: _lack of learning at home_ and _lack of clear expectations for parents_. Lack of learning at home seemed to be the most frustrating aspect for teachers and administrators, since they felt that a complementary home environment was the most important aspect necessary for parents to get involved in their children’s education. Learning at home, for this limited sample of participants, was defined as having time, a place at home, support during and a completion check on all homework or projects. Educational activities such as museums or library trips were also mentioned. This theme is noteworthy due to its negative and judgmental generalized connotation that there is a general lack of this type of learning at home, but may not be accurate of all parents. This _lack of learning at home_ theme is also significant for the current study because it has the potential to be the point around which the most tension arises between teachers and parents since it is based on personal values that may or not be shared among stakeholders. The second theme, _lack of clear expectations for parents_, seems to be juxtaposed to _lack of learning at home_ because it is the schools’ responsibility to make their expectations clear. If school personnel do not, however, it may be impossible to expect that parents understand (without proper guidance) the type of home learning environment schools want for their students, the type of assistance schools want for their students from the parents, or how to connect learning at home to the school curriculum. These two codes, _lack of clear expectations for parents_ and _lack of learning at home_, are the impetus for the current study due their complementary, yet
oppositional nature in this school. These themes tentatively suggest that one of the greatest “barriers” to parent-school partnerships is a lack of shared understanding on the role of parents. I suggest that these desired behaviors cannot occur, since parents, teachers, and administrators have not actually communicated these beliefs and values to one another. Therefore, driving the current research is the idea that understanding one another’s perceptions regarding parent involvement could potentially act as the catalyst for partnerships to occur in this particular low-income, urban middle school.

Research Design

This study was designed to collect rich data regarding perceived roles of parents at the middle school level, particularly in low-income, urban middle schools. These viewpoints have then been compared with the social structures (or lack thereof) in place to actually create home-school partnerships aimed at raising student achievement. To capture these descriptions, a qualitative case study was designed with an underlying action research stance to collaboratively gather and implement change to improve parent involvement at this school.

Qualitative Research

Glesne (1999) addresses the way researchers choose their research designs based on personal conceptions of meaningful knowledge and basic ontological beliefs. Qualitative methods are “generally supported by the interpretivist (also referred to as constructivist) paradigm” (Glesne, 1999, p. 5). These paradigms act as skeletal guidelines and determine the research methods, purpose of study, and role of the researcher. The qualitative paradigm can explicate the underlying beliefs and distinct values regarding parent involvement at the middle school level, which are thinly understood or studied. In taking this more “interpretivist” approach to my work, I am dealing with “multiple, socially constructed realities or ‘qualities’ that are
complex and indivisible into discrete variables…to understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (Glesne, 1999, p. 5). In this research, understanding one another’s perspectives can provide the fundamental basis to appreciate and tolerate multiple viewpoints, which is necessary for parents, teachers and administrators to work together toward educating low-income youth.

Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) define qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 4). In my study, the “world” in which I as researcher am located has an underlying existing tension: both a broad research agenda of perceptions about parent involvement and a narrow scope of experience at one school (Nelson et al., 1992 in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) also recognize that while all research has political implications, qualitative research also has the unique ability to bring together “the hopes, needs, goals and promises of a free democratic society” (p. 4). Creating common understanding, language, and bridges to help low-income, urban students navigate both home and school is necessary for students’ futures in schooling and as productive citizens. Bringing together three groups of adult stakeholders for the sake of student achievement will require me to process the situational orientation at the local level, collect individual points of view in the context of everyday life constraints, and value rich descriptions as having transformative power within this qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). These considerations may help to begin the process of enriching home-school partnerships by first providing an understanding of the underlying perceptions of adult stakeholders regarding the role of parent involvement in this low-income, urban middle school.
Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) speak of six broad themes of qualitative research: directly investigates subjective experience; incorporates meaningful stories; allows for naturalistic observation and description; is a tool for studying diversity; uses the research participants as expert informants; views reflexivity as an asset by explicitly using the researcher’s general subjectivity and values. These themes resonate with both the research questions and the research methodology needed in the area of middle school parent involvement. First, studying the experiences and voices through interviews of those stakeholders actually engaging parents in authentic partnerships allows stories and personal expert knowledge to emerge. Second, my immersion in the realities of this school allows discovery of both the connections and the disjunctures between beliefs/values stated, and actual practice. Finally, through the use of memos and field note journals, I engaged in reflexivity to check personal subjectivity consistently. Through understanding culture and social structure commonality or difference, this research has the potential to help adult stakeholders understand one another within the school community. The clarification of roles and responsibilities is the start of increasing parent engagement for the sake of raising student achievement. This in-depth knowledge is more fully attained through a case study approach.

Case Study

More specifically, this research was designed as a qualitative case study to understand how parents, teachers and administrators conceive of the appropriate role for parents at one Roslyn Public middle school. Yin (2003) offers a technical definition, which provides clear implications for this work. “A case study is an empirical inquiry that: investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). As addressed in the pilot study, there
are contextual issues such as school and district structures and parent demographics that impede schools and parents in the promotion of parent involvement. Therefore, a case study strategy is appropriate in order to cover the wide range of contextual conditions pertinent to this study while also exposing new findings. In addition, Yin states that the case study “copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points” (p. 13). Therefore, my use of multiple data sources--namely, semi-focused interviews, observations and artifacts, which are discussed in further detail below-- allow me to validate my findings through triangulating the multiple data sources gathered in this school. Simultaneously, analysis of the multiple viewpoints of parents, teachers and administrators deepens the understanding of the experience between personnel and families at this school. “Each unit of analysis implies a different kind of data collection, a different focus for the analysis of data and a different level at which statements about findings and conclusions would be made” (Patton, 2002, p. 101). By including the triangulation of perspectives within multiple data collection strategies, I was able to more accurately describe the variation of experiences in order to understand the variation of experiences (Patton, 2002).

I have chosen a single case study to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 1984, p. 14). This holistic approach takes the main unit of analysis, the school, and breaks it down into subunits of analysis--the parents, teachers and administrators--for the purpose of data collection (Merriam, 1988). This case study is exploratory in nature due to the lack of data regarding perceptions of authentic and meaningful middle school parent involvement by these particular stakeholders. The case study research strategy is preferred for contemporary issues (Yin, 2003) and therefore allowed me to gather current observations, interviews, and artifacts that relate to the study at hand. The contemporary issues of high-stakes
testing and global economics have implications related to the need for urban families to gain information to help their children to successfully navigate high school and obtain access to college. This case study’s ability to deal with contemporary issues in a holistic manner is significant for the research questions being addressed, and is more clearly understood by the use of action research.

*Action Research*

This study employs an action research methodology aimed at directly and intentionally improving matters at one low-income, urban middle school. According to Creswell (2005), action research designs “are systematic procedures done...to gather information about and subsequently improve, the ways their particular educational setting operates, their teaching, and their student learning” (Creswell, 2005, p. 550). The systematic approach to studying the perceptions, values and beliefs of parents, teachers, and administrators regarding the role of parent involvement will allow local-level stakeholders to better understand each other’s conception of the parents’ role. From this understanding, the school community can then potentially design more effective strategies to achieve functional home-school partnerships.

Action researchers have a distinct ideology that drives the purpose, questions and data collection strategies for their research, which is to “empower, transform and emancipate individuals from situations that constrain their self-development and self-determination” (Creswell, 2005, p. 550). Using a collaborative approach, this research aims to reveal underlying ideas about appropriate roles and responsibilities of parent involvement by including a diverse set of viewpoints. The ultimate purpose is to create more meaningful, democratic partnerships between parents, teachers and administrators.
This study is designed to improve matters at this school. “To build effective dynamical models of educational institutions we will need to know not just what people do, but why they do it, how they might imagine things being different and what they would really want to do” (Buell & Cassidy, 2001, p. 123). By targeting parents’, teachers’ and administrators’ voices regarding appropriate parent roles, it is more likely that fitting behaviors and structures can be implemented. The “silenced dialogue” (Delpit, 2006; Freire, 2000) of minority, low-income and traditionally “powerless” families, still occurs in schools today. Silenced stakeholders speaks to power discourses and the need for those directly working with students to be understood by one another in order to unite to more effectively meet students’ educational needs. Delpit (2006) argues that this understanding of one another’s values begins with dialogue.

The conversations around this issue began in September 2007, when I first became the principal intern at this school and began facilitating the parent council. Through my work with a small group of parents (four in total who regularly attended), I realized that both the school personnel and parents themselves were disappointed with parent engagement at the school. This group consistently met monthly and planned a few events that they have occurred in our second year: spaghetti supper for the first open house; coffee and cookies for the second open house; a teacher appreciation breakfast; a valentine’s day fundraiser; and the attainment of a grant from Lowes for $5,000 to landscape the outside of the school (half was completed in the spring of 2008 and the other half in the spring of 2009). In my role as facilitator, I was able to share all of the positive events and programs happening at the school, which parents are not otherwise made aware of. In addition, our meetings sometimes lost their main focus when parents had questions about services, programs or opportunities that the school had, but about which their child had not reported. Although tangential to our agenda, these conversations seemed to be the biggest draw
for some parents to acquire information about school resources and programs, and to support
them in the difficult task of raising an early adolescent child.

When I conducted the pilot study in the spring, I learned how important parents, teachers
and administrators alike felt the role of the parent is in the education of their child. I was
surprised however, because I had not observed that same emphasis in the types of
communication the school carried out with parents, or the number of parents who visited the
school, other than for behavioral or special education meetings, which were mandated.
Simultaneously, in my interviews with a parent, a teacher and an administrator, along with
informal conversations with parent council members, teachers and administrators, I learned that
everyone wanted the parent role to be consistent with setting high standards of achievement.
However, teachers admitted to not having communicated these expectations to parents, and
parents admitted not necessarily knowing how to create the environment or message at home that
would best support their child’s academic needs at this level of schooling. These past measures
have warranted the current action research methods. The collected findings will not only include
the voices of all three parties charged with uniting to educate students, but results will also be
shared with all three groups for the purpose of implementing change. It is my belief that not until
stakeholders understand one another’s perspectives can ideas be transformed into reforming the
current situation.

This year, although I am no longer the principal’s intern, I have remained a participant on
the parent council. I have passed off my role as facilitator to two parents who create agendas,
lead meetings and guide decision-making. My ability to communicate from the school’s
perspective, having been a former staff member, or to report out for the principal regarding
events and programs available at the school, allows the group to stay connected to the teachers
Leaving No Family Behind

and administrators. This has enabled the group to feel empowered enough to request a meeting with the principal on their ideas for more effective communication with the parent population. This drive for action at the school necessitates the specific research methods chosen.

Research Methodology

“Qualitative research is inherently multi-method in focus” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 7). Therefore, various data sources will be used in this descriptive qualitative case study of one low-income, urban Northeast middle school. This research employed semi-structured interviews, observations and the review of school artifacts.

Semi-Structured Interviews

At the very core of using in-depth interviews is the idea that they provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of participants (Seidman, 2006). Interviews come in many forms. On one end of the spectrum, tightly structured, pre-set and closed questions produce the structured interview, whose strength is that each participant answers the same questions, which the researcher is able to compare directly as research data. On the other side, open-ended, loosely-structured interviews, seen as a conversation, produce the unstructured interview, which allows participant responses to guide the direction of the questions. However, for this study, the purposes of the interviews were two-fold and therefore lend themselves to the middle ground, or semi-structured approach. In order to gain deep understanding of issues around values and beliefs surrounding parent participation at this level of schooling, each stakeholder needed to answer similar types of questions (Cherry, 2000). This allowed for common themes to emerge, while allowing participants to feel comfortable as experts. However, I realized that in order for me to gain the clearest picture of the participants themselves, as well as of their personal familiarity with parental involvement, it is necessary to allow their responses
to prompt more probing questions. “Mixing both structured and unstructured interview techniques…to gather data can result in a more in-depth picture of the people you are studying” (Cherry, p. 57). This combination allowed me to “recognize and affirm the role of the instrument, the human interviewer” (Seidman, 2006, p. 23). This instrument is then used as a more flexible and judicious tool to respond to situations as they arise. The semi-structured interview protocols available (see Appendix A-D) provide structure within each interview to address similar issues, but also allow for clarifying or probing questions.

Observations

As I am both a researcher and a member at this middle school’s School Parent Council (SPC) and in its School Site Council (SSC), observations are considered participant observations since I am contributing to the “activities of the process under study” as a member of both of these councils (Cherry, 2000, p. 56). During these meetings, members of each committee were aware of the dual purpose of my attendance so that my position was transparent. Being both a participant and a researcher created some valuable opportunities. These include the opportunity to attend and participate in school events, and have access to various school-related groups, all of which have created a deeper understanding of the parties involved from internal perspectives (Yin, 2003). According to Yin, the potential problems that inherently exist are based on researcher biases. First, researchers may find myself in more of an advocacy role, rather than in an external role most common to scientific research. Second, researchers may become supporters of the group by finding personal views aligned. Third, involvement with participants may not allow the researcher to take either enough or too in-depth notes, while trying to simultaneously participate. Finally, because of the multiple stakeholders and groups who are involved, researchers can struggle to identify the right places in which to gain the most pertinent
information, since it is not possible to be present at every meeting, conference and interaction between these three groups of stakeholders. To address these concerns, let me emphasize that I was aware of personal biases in being a participant-observer and made participants aware of my dual role. I was consistently engaged in reflexivity regarding my own perceptions of events, viewpoints and experiences throughout the research, and kept track of my own values, beliefs and feelings through the use of a field notes journal. Through this journal, I noted separations of my personal feelings from what participants shared and acted upon in order to clarify actual data from personal bias.

In addition to researcher bias, there are inherent concerns for participants. With heightened awareness of being studied, it is possible that participants may change their behavior to help me as relationships are formed, known as “confounded effects,” from being observed (Cherry, 2000). Since I am going into this research having previously held relationships with various participants and an ideological perspective on the role of parents, these confounded effects were carefully monitored and recorded in field note journals and theoretical memos to ensure transparency when analyzing these data. After each interview, I recorded participants’ apparent anxieties and tensions during parts of our conversation, as well as what themes, issues or ideas they repeated or seemed to refer back to regularly. After observations, I noted the topics that provoked rich conversations or more heightened emotional reactions.

Specifically, I attended events such as report card pick-up sessions, open houses and potluck dinners, yet many participants being observed were unaware of my role as researcher. Therefore, this research employs a “mixed approach” to observing (Cherry, 2000), by assessing when it was be appropriate to make all participants aware of my role as researcher, or refraining, when it was more inappropriate to interrupt the natural flow of an event. While the majority of
observations conducted will entail participant observation, I did not interrupt events, meetings or interactions to inform all participants of my role. This was not meant to be coercive or secretive, but rather to allow events and dialogue to occur naturally, and to avoid disrupting interactions as they evolve organically. In addition, my participant observations are designed to gain additional information, but do not offer any threat to the participants involved since recordings were not taken, direct quotes are not used, and participants are not identified in drafts or final chapters.

**Artifacts**

As part of a case study, artifacts are relevant and provide more information to corroborate other data sources. The particular artifacts in this study are documents, namely school and district policy around parent involvement, the agendas and minutes that are produced at School Parent Council (SPC) and School Site Council (SSC) meetings, as well as any documentation sent home to parents as a form of communication about activities at the school. According to Yin (2003), these records can be used for several purposes: first, documents will augment the observations and interviews by providing explicit details about the role that parents are asked to play at the school. Second, they provide specific details to corroborate information received from other sources. Thus, they can confirm or refute the themes I generated from the participants’ perceptions and experiences revealed through the interviews. Third, I was able to make inferences based on documents, such as a record of the sequence of events at meetings. However, it is important not to rely too heavily on these documents, as they were created for specific purposes and for specific audiences at the school, not for the purpose of this study. Nevertheless, these artifacts will provide perspective as to what transpires at the school with regard to parent involvement. Perusal of these documents will assist in disentangling beliefs around the role of the parent from the actions that actually take place at the school. Documents will be analyzed in
terms of both how parents are asked to be engaged at the school versus how they are not invited or demanded to be part of school functions and decisions to determine if perceptions of the parent role actually match what transpires. (An overview of the research methodology is provided in Appendix E).

Sample

When selecting the sample used in this study, I sought to “purposefully select” (Patton, 2002, p. 105; Seidman, 2006, p. 52) participants who could be representative of the larger population in the school and of the other middle schools in the district. I also sought to use this sample to understand the actual experience of the stakeholders in this school through collecting data in sufficient depth that readers outside the study could connect to this experience and obtain a deep understanding of the issues involved. It was neither possible nor wise to randomly select participants for the purpose of this study since “…The resulting participant pool is not likely to be idiosyncratic” and “true randomness would be prohibitive in an in-depth interview study” (Seidman, 2006, p. 51). Therefore purposeful sampling was used “…to help manage the trade-off between the desire for in-depth, detailed information about cases and the desire to be able to generalize about the program” (Patton, 2002, p. 101). (A summary of participants is available in Appendix E).

Roslyn Public Schools

In general, the demographics of the Roslyn Public Schools and of this particular middle school offer a clear picture of this sample, its reflection of the district, and the rationale for its selection. The Roslyn Public School District is the oldest public school system in the United States, founded in 1647. The Roslyn Public School District has seen much growth, as well as turmoil, through its long history. Court-ordered desegregation in 1974 caused civil unrest and
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racial strife among residents as “busing” resulted in a mass exodus of children from the public schools. Roslyn Public Schools currently serve about 60,000 students in 139 schools, with a diverse population, including roughly half African-American, a third Hispanic and the remaining students either white or Asian. In addition, the special education population is roughly 25 percent, while about 10 percent of total enrollment consists of English language learners. Today, school reforms have changed the way students are served, with two of the city’s largest high schools being transformed into several smaller learning communities known as educational complexes. There are also a number of pilot schools, which offer more flexibility in budget allocations and curriculum implementation, similar to charter schools, while they remain accountable to the district. Several exam schools enroll students for an academically challenging environment, but maintain public status (United Nations Association of the United States of America and the Business Council for the United Nations, 2008).

Currently, some policies and goals of the Roslyn Public School District are being reformed. This includes focusing on the creation of neighborhood schools, consistency for families with less transitions for students, and ultimately, keeping the goal of “graduation for all” at the forefront. All consolidations and policies have also been highly influenced by the current economic crisis and by the superintendent’s attempts at closing the budget deficit through consolidations and cutting transportation costs (Roslyn Public Schools, 2008e). Ironically, this research began before these policies were announced, but this re-alignment provides even more impetus for my research. These policies recognize that busing is no longer efficient, and that neighborhood schools allow for more parental and community involvement. In addition, the rationale is based on reducing the number of transitions those students and their families undergo through the creation of more K-8 or 6-12 schools, as opposed to separate elementary, middle and
high schools. With students remaining in the same building for more schooling, parents have more time to learn to navigate their particular schools and build relationships with teachers and personnel.

However, for the nine traditional middle schools that will be left after re-alignment, the need for understanding of more effective ways to involve parents at the middle school level within just three years, is crucial for these schools to raise student achievement. In addition, since the ultimate goal for all the reforms is” graduation for all,” this work of creating school-family partnerships to further student success is imperative. The plan to graduate all students means more preparation for high school and more support to gain college access (Roslyn Public Schools, 2008e). This realignment further parallels the practical purposes of this current research: to improve parent involvement for the sake of students’ success in K-12 schooling. Research has shown that low-income urban parents need information regarding instruction on how to be an advocate for their children throughout their schooling, and how to plan for high school and college, beginning in middle school (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005).

The Revere Middle School

I chose this particular middle school as the research site not only for access purposes but, more importantly, because it currently represents the highest performing, non-exam middle school in the district based on state standardized test scores. While this middle school enjoys high achievement, their scores do not reflect proficiency (passing by state law) for every student, a situation with which this staff is not satisfied. The principal and the staff have set their yearly goal as “Excellence,” which, in their words, entails raising the bar for everyone at the school to continue to meet the schools’ motto: “The Revere Middle School, A Tradition of Excellence.” Therefore, this middle school is an ideal setting for this research to further involve parents and
families in the important work the principal and staff are currently engaged: to raise student achievement to levels that would help close the achievement gap and give more low-income, urban students access to College.

This research has the potential to expose perceptions of parent involvement that could lead to an increase in the number and quality of family-school partnerships regarding the curriculum at the school and matching these high expectations for students at home. The school seeks to raise student achievement regardless of race, class or ethnicity. The Revere school has an enrollment of about 500 students, in 6th, 7th and 8th grade, with roughly a quarter of the population enrolled in special education and six percent in bilingual education. The population of the school itself is a little more than half black, just under a quarter Hispanic, about 10% Asian and less than 10% white. The average daily attendance rate of students is around 95%. The percentage of students promoted to the next grade also falls at about 95. There are about 65 staff members who also have a daily attendance rate around 95%. The staff is over half white, a quarter black, and roughly five percent Hispanic and Asian. Among the lead teachers, over 90% are highly qualified and licensed in Massachusetts (Roslyn Public Schools, 2008h).

The Revere Middle School offers an extensive number of programs to increase the number of staff relationships with students as well as to promote higher levels of achievement for the whole school community. The school is broken into smaller learning communities called clusters, which are led by teachers with the dual role of teacher and administrator. The departments of core subjects, namely, math, English language arts, social studies and science, meet weekly to discuss issues around teaching and learning, to align curriculum, and to review multiple assessments to better inform practice. An advisory program includes administrators guiding one or two classes weekly within a cluster around various issues such as student
achievement, student goals and college access. The on-site, teacher-led AVID program (Achievement Via Individual Determination), is a nationally-funded program designed to give middle and high school students the motivation and study skills to be successful in college. It is currently in its second year of implementation at Revere. Through an external grant, the school was awarded the funds to expand their one class of Algebra I students into two classes in the 2008-09 school year. By 2009-2010, it will be available to all eighth-grade students to gain high school credit.

The school has developed leadership groups, which focus on various aspects of the school culture and high instructional standards such as the School Site Council, Student Support Team, School Parent Council, Instructional Leadership Team, Faculty Senate, and Student Council. In addition, there are three open houses per year, a sixth grade parent orientation, and quarterly honor roll celebrations. Outside of school hours, partnerships with the Roslyn Public Library and Community Center, the Citizens Schools apprenticeship program and Outward Bound provide students with enriching activities. Finally, a large number of teachers are enrolled in graduate courses for their own professional growth, and monthly professional development is planned and implemented on-site to meet individual school, cluster and department needs (Roslyn Public Schools, 2008f).

**Specific Sample of Participants Interviewed**

In line with Seidman (2006) and Patton’s (2002) thinking regarding purposeful sampling, I considered it essential to choose maximum variation sampling, and to find three or four cases to represent a range that would “increase confidence in common patterns that cut across different programs” (Patton, 2002, p. 105). A cross section of parents, teachers and administrators were chosen for this study to maximize the variation in the case selection to understand multiple
experiences of adult stakeholders that represent the school: the diverse racial populations at the school such as black, Hispanic, white, Asian and Native American and the age range of sixth, seventh or eighth grade student populations (See Appendix E). Due to the laws and regulations for special education students and to the increase in mandated contact with parents, the special education population of teachers and administrators were left out of this study. However, there are some active parents in the School Parent Council whose opinions would enhance the findings outside of their individually labeled special education children who will be included and will be identified as such in the findings. In addition, the Vietnamese bilingual cluster has its own set of teachers and students. Due to the distinct cultural value of families not participating at schools, parents and teachers from this cluster will not be included. This purposeful sampling also entailed my defining terms (Seidman) such as “low-income” and “urban parents,” as well as the distinction between teachers in the school, sole administrators, and administrators who also teach classes. Considering the range of categories within each set of stakeholders (Seidman) allows different perspectives based on culture, class or personal values to be evaluated. However, it was important that within this wide range, the research remained within certain limits for me to be able to complete the study (Seidman).

The participants were asked to voluntarily partake in this study. In addition to the committee members on the School Site Council and on the School Parent Council who were observed, other specific individuals were chosen to be interviewed for me to gain a wide breadth of data that could represent the larger population at the school for interviewing purposes. Four major categories of stakeholders contributed: administrators, administrators with teaching responsibilities, teachers, and parents. Within administrators only, three single interviews of the principal, vice principal and student support guidance counselor occurred. Of these
administrators, two are black and one is white. Administrators offer the perspective of how leaders in the school view the parents’ role to collaborate with the mission, vision and implementation of the school’s goals and curriculum. A broader picture of all departments, grades, levels of students, and understanding of individual teachers can be gained through administrators.

Within the group of administrators with teaching responsibilities, three interviews were conducted with the following participants: the math department chair, who also teaches one math class and is the cluster leader of one eighth grade cluster; the social studies department chair, who also teaches one social studies section and leads a split 6th/7th grade cluster; and a cluster leader of both a sixth- and seventh-grade cluster and also teaches a reading class. All three cluster-leaders are white. These administrators with teaching responsibilities were selected as a distinct group of educators in the school who deal with behavior and learning issues frequently, and are the first line of contact for either parents or teachers who are having issues with students academically or behaviorally.

Within the teacher category, a range of grade levels and subject areas are represented in four interviews. In particular, from the sixth grade, one science teacher participated; in the seventh grade, one teacher who has one section of social studies and one section of ELA, and one AVID classroom teacher participated. Within the eighth grade, one math teacher chose to participate. Of the teacher group, one is Hispanic, and three are white. Teachers’ perspectives are essential, as they work with these students daily, and potentially have the most accurate view of students’ personalities and relations with peers at school, as well as an up-to-date perspective on students’ academic strengths and weaknesses.
Within the parent category, six interviews were completed to gather a wide range of racial and ethnic groups, children’s grade level, and level of participation at the school. More specifically, the parents included two sixth-grade, two seventh-grade and two eighth-grade parents. Two parents are black, two white, and two are Hispanic. Two of these parents have children labeled as special education, but the parents’ participation is broader than just with their individual child’s special needs, so their perspectives are included. Of these, four have participated in school events and two do not have a history of being directly involved at the school. Parents’ perspectives are crucial, as their beliefs determine the actual initiative to get involved in the school. They are also the primary educators of their children and have the most in-depth knowledge of their children’s strengths and weaknesses, academically, in extra-curricular areas and socially. They have the added knowledge of longitudinal, historical information about students’ successes and struggles, to which most school personnel do not have in depth access. Teachers and administrators assisted me in finding families willing to participate despite their lack of involvement at the school.

It was important for this research to include parents who do not directly participate at the school in traditional forms of parent involvement, but are actively engaged from home in order to understand their beliefs surrounding the role of parents. Therefore, two parents who work full time and cannot be on committees or attend all events at the school were included to see how their perceptions of parent involvement in middle school may vary from traditional definitions. Simultaneously, including parents whom teachers have absolutely no contact with seemed a moot point of contact since their lack of any involvement seems to imply they may not believe in family participation at schools. This research is aimed at more clearly defining an appropriate role at the middle school level.
Data-Gathering Procedures

This formal research was conducted over the course of 3 months, but I was present in the building for 15 months prior, including during the pilot study, an internship with the principal and work with the parent council. During the months of formal data-gathering procedures, the research included 16 semi-structured interviews, three School Parent Council Meeting observations, three School Site Council meetings observations, one open house for report card meetings and both the school and district policy regarding parent engagement. In addition, artifacts collected from the observations have been reviewed.

In order to keep the various groups’ responses interacting with one another for the purpose of my own analysis, I have spiraled interviews with the various stakeholders, rather than having isolated interviews with one group. It is important that each interview inform the next. Therefore, alternating parent, teacher and administrator interviews with simultaneous observations and analysis of documents allowed a clearer point of data saturation. I have methodically kept detailed memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss, 1987) after each interview, observation or artifact analysis in order to record my observations of participants, experiences, and anything else that may strike me as pertinent to the study. All of these together, with the constant comparison method, have augmented finding patterns and themes so that data saturation was reached methodically and rigorously.

Interviews themselves lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and locations varied depending on the stakeholder. The administrator and teacher interviews occurred at the school in various rooms, as did the majority of parent interviews, except one, which I conducted in their home. I transcribed interviews within 48 hours to remain close to the data for analysis purposes. In addition, HyperTRANSCRIBE data software was used to allow sets of dialogue loops to aid in
accurate transcription. This software was used to assist me and then transcriptions were checked thoroughly. All three types of data (interviews, observations, and documents) were uploaded into HyperRESEARCH for organizational purposes to determine themes and saturation of data.

Method of Data Analysis

The context of this research provides important insight into data analysis in that “delineating the context or conditions …not only grounds concepts, but also minimizes the chances of distorting meaning and/or misrepresenting intent” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 57). Within this framework, it is important to know that data analysis began with the first collection of data. This is critical in order to constantly compare, validate, and develop concepts as a process of alternating between data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss). As described above, all documents were uploaded into a computer software organizational tool known as HyperRESEARCH. This research software was used for the purposes of organization of both data documents and coding organization. The use of the computer for storage and filing was necessary for organizing the large amount of data obtained between interviews, observations and document analysis. Before discussing steps of analysis, it is important to understand the unit of analysis being evaluated.

Unit of Analysis

Of particular importance to the case study approach is an understanding of the “unit of analysis” (Yin, 2003, p. 22) under evaluation. This study has three distinct levels of analysis to be explored. At the broadest level, I analyzed the middle school itself to understand the overall sets of values that influence behaviors and actions. At the second level, I evaluated the three groups of stakeholders to derive possible sets of group values. Finally, I examined the working relationships between the administrators, the teachers and the parents. When exploring
relationships as a unit of analysis, more localized research that addresses specific context and actors requires rigorous research practices, which are transparent and regularly recorded (Yin, 2003). “The search for grand narratives are being replaced by more local, small-scale theories fitted to specific problems and specific situations” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 27).

Relationships between schools and parents are particularly strained in today’s society. It was essential that research be done to explore the perceptions surrounding these relationships. Through these three sets of stakeholders, decisions are made, responsibilities are delegated, and support is provided to students. However, the values and beliefs are not always shared, and therefore actions and behaviors are not always consistent, sending varied messages to youth. Understanding one another and relationships building between adult stakeholders is central to whether or not home-school partnerships provide youth meaningful academic and social support.

Analysis Procedures

In alignment with Corbin and Strauss (2008), I remain committed to the use of analytic tools to allow for clarification, to avoid standard ways of thinking that distance the researcher from the technical literature or personal experience, and to allow the labeling of concepts and categories to be meaningful to both the participants and the existing parent involvement literature. Two of the main analytic tools I employed are asking questions and making comparisons as forms of inductive analysis. Questioning the data was used to base my thinking on a wider set of possible answers, to encourage a deeper analysis of common themes, and to thoroughly present the matter of this study. The second analytic tool employed, the use of comparisons, allowed me to see the larger picture of all the data in light of other sources. The ability to compare interviews interspersed from various stakeholders is an invaluable resource, which allowed themes to emerge, perspectives to be contrasted and myself as researcher to
recognize data saturation. Although the pilot study provided a superficial level of deductive reasoning, or “hypothesis-testing research” (p. 13), employing more inductive thinking and analysis, or “hypothesis-generating theory” (p. 14) throughout this research allowed the complexity of the issues at hand and the data to reveal themselves more organically.

In agreement with Strauss’ (1987) discussion of how to make sense of complex data, I have: allowed the data to be conceptually dense; used hierarchical versions of how the data reveals itself; and have rigidly analyzed through the use of field notes, theoretical memos, exact transcriptions, organizational use of HyperRESEARCH, and inductive analysis. Strauss (1987) termed this work process as needing to be “disciplined.” I employed discipline in the following ways: commitment to consistent note-taking; regularly asking questions of the data; verifying drafts with participants as much as possible; coding the data in terms of practical use for the context of this middle school; and writing up analysis in terms of the integration of perspectives from parents, teachers and administrators in creating more authentic partnerships with the purpose of raising student achievement.

The work process yielded a “coding paradigm,” (Strauss, 1987) which provided structure and validity to my process of analyzing subjective data such as qualitative interviews, observations and documents. The initial step consists of open coding and is known for its unrestrictive nature in which large amounts of data are scrutinized to identify concepts that fit the data. Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) suggest how to go from raw text to theoretical constructs by: narrowing research to relevant text; seeking similar words or phrases that suggest repeating ideas; looking for groups of repeating ideas to create themes; using themes to create theoretical constructs, and, finally, creating theoretical narratives to describe these themes. In this research, these steps were employed and were especially important in comparing across interviews of the
three groups of stakeholders to see where similar ideas arose, as well as where they differed, to develop themes with the potential for conclusive theoretical constructs. In addition, Merriam (1988) suggests some strategies that fit this study such as “seeing plausibility” and “clustering” in order to group ideas from the three perspectives regarding parent involvement that related in practical terms and used with this school community.

The subsequent step, called “axial coding,” consists of higher-intensity analysis conducted with each emerging construct in order to gain “cumulative knowledge about relationships between that category and other categories and subcategories” (Strauss, 1987, p. 32). This step allowed me to choose categories that became core ideas or themes. These were further analyzed with the use of “theoretical memos,” which clarify the experiences of the participants and myself as researcher (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss, 1987). These detailed notes helped in the selective coding phase and were chosen systematically as analytic memos became more focused for theory integration (Strauss). In this research, analysis through clustering major concepts and analyzing viewpoints cyclically allowed the three perspectives to be collected and checked through one another simultaneously for accurate findings. This method, developed by Glaser & Straus (1967) known as the “constant comparative method,” allowed “evidence collected from other comparative groups… to check out whether the initial evidence was correct” (p. 23). Simultaneously, this form of data collection and analysis acted as a metaphor for what parents, teachers and administrators in all low-income, urban middle schools should be striving to achieve – regularly hearing one another in order to create relationships, partnerships and programs that best serve the students.

This research was coded for major themes always relating back to the context of the study. First and foremost, concepts or “words that stand for ideas contained in the data” were
“interpretations or products of analysis” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 159) that emerge directly from the data. In this research, concepts were direct statements made by participants and confirmed by subsequent interviews, observations or documents. This method confirmed that the I was in “constant dialogue with empirical data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 159).

Simultaneously, I took into account the context of the school, as defined by Corbin & Strauss (2008) to mean: “The sets of conditions that give rise to problems or circumstances to which individuals respond by means of action/interaction/emotion” (p. 229). The context ranges from large-scale context of the Northeast city this school is set in, to the smaller-scale factors of the particular school, such as having smaller learning communities or clusters within the building. Therefore, I used an analytical tool called the “conditional matrix” (Corbin & Strauss) to consider the range of conditions and consequences that enter into the picture of parent involvement at this school. Again, the use of memos was extremely important in remembering the detailed exploration of what happened during observations, or the emotions of a participant when discussing certain topics or patterns that emerged in documents. These evaluations allowed for the constant comparison of beliefs and values against actual practices and experiences of parent partnerships, with the aim of raising student achievement. Aside from the technical and procedural methods of analysis, the theoretical lens through which the data will be viewed is a sociocultural perspective.

Sociocultural Theory

This theory addresses participants’ cultural stance (people’s values and beliefs) against the accepted social structures (actions and behavior). Geertz (1973) defines culture as “the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings and make their judgments” (pp. 144-145). Culture is therefore
something socially constructed, but has an underlying paradox: On the one hand, people create culture, but on the other hand, predisposed cultural values determine their perceptions of their world in particular ways. “Culture is never neutral” (Gee, 1990, p. 90) and therefore is always acting on our choices, preferences and values. While culture is not predictive, it has great potential to demarcate or influence the way people act (Geertz, 1973), or the social structures created. Social constructs are constantly interacting with people’s beliefs based on reinforced actions and are made up of the existing contexts in which cultural values are played out. “If the methodological framework does not leave space for the experiences to address the discourses and social context that shape them, the experiences cannot speak out or back to the social structures” (Saukko, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 466).

For the present research, the intention is to describe the values and beliefs of the three major groups of adult stakeholders who determine the types and levels of parent engagement in one school. Through deeper understanding of where values are shared or diverge, agreements can be reached by the multiple stakeholders in the appropriate role of parents at this middle school. From this knowledge, more desired and effective programs to involve parents in raising student achievement can potentially be reached. In Lawrence-Lightfoot’s research on parent-teacher conferences (2003), she highlights how historical, contextual, cultural and autobiographical influences determine the way relationships are formed. She articulates how communication and involvement between parents and schools are affected. “This subtext is defined by both autobiographical narratives and generational echoes, and by resonances from the broader cultural and historical tableaux” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, p. 39). Communication is enhanced when adults begin to recognize, understand and empathize with these forces that surround their interactions and the values they may separately place on education.
Without deeper understanding of personal beliefs surrounding the parent roles, relationships between school personnel and parents are strained. Today, this is further exacerbated by routines and norms that limit parents and personnel to meet. In her research, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2002) has found that both teachers and parents feel meetings and interactions lack depth, regularity and substantive conversation, while being tension filled -- allowing neither party to gain the deeper knowledge of the child they both seek. Rituals include three conferences a year, which often “lack real substance and are designed to avoid truth-telling” because “the ritual turns into mechanical, meaningless routine” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, p. 49). Authenticity is missing from these conversations, which contain deep underlying imbalances of knowledge and power with inadequate meaningful dialogues regarding individual students. Parent-teacher conferences and school personnel’s overall relationships with parents, therefore, become a metaphor for the paradox of high ideals and broken dreams for our children, all of which may lead to disappointment in our schools (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2002).

These social and cultural contexts relate to the research in why parents get involved in their children’s education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005), which has been shown to be determined by four major socially-influenced factors: parental role constructs in their children’s education; parental beliefs about the difference they can actually make by getting involved; the schools invitations and demands on parents to become involved; contextual factors (i.e. transportation, childcare, time of day). Therefore, parents’ decisions to get involved at their children’s school are not just socially driven by their own current experience, but also by a more intrinsic predisposition towards certain cultural values as inherited from their parents, their current social network, and their own experiences in school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler; Hoover-Dempsey, et al.)
For this research and for the purposes of improving practice at this middle school, sociocultural theory has implications for the contextual issues surrounding concepts that emerge during data analysis. I am not exploring individual cultures. Rather, I will use two broader agendas based on modern sociocultural theorists (Gee, 1990; Lareau, 2003; Mehan, 2008): Comparing institutional dominant cultures of schools compared with the individual families from varying backgrounds; and more specifically, within this one school, the embedded culture surrounding parent involvement with the social structures created for the purpose of parent involvement. This is based on the argument that there are distinct cultures of schools as dominant culture institutions from the particular backgrounds and capabilities of individual learners. Especially learners and their parents from a non-dominant perspective often fail to meet mainstreamed cultural beliefs of schools, or schools fail to afford access that accounts for these differences. Understanding not only the school culture, but also the cultures of each group of stakeholders is necessary to understanding the “assumptions and conceptions that are so over learned that one no longer questions or thinks about them” (Sarason, 1971, p. 193). This overarching school culture creates the social structures in place, or the current status of home-school partnerships. But as interviews describe the culture of each stakeholder groups’ beliefs, understanding perceptions and stances on the role of parents in middle school could potentially lead to more innovative ways of defining and carrying out parent involvement.

Furthermore, sociocultural studies have implications within this qualitative research frame for two reasons: there are issues of collaboration and power sharing between the home and school that need to be better understood in order to be resolved; and there are ethical considerations concerning middle school students’ success in high school and access to higher education (Saukko, In Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Roslyn Public Schools’ students take the
mandated public school statewide-standardized exam in tenth grade, which means they have three years of middle school, but fewer than two in high school to prepare for an exam that determines whether or not they graduate from high school. Therefore, these middle level years are essential for students’ future success. Using the frame of sociocultural studies allows both implications to be reached: There is a communal stance, which includes involving multiple perspectives to empower the stakeholders themselves charged with creating more meaningful parent involvement to raise student achievement; and this has the potential to create understanding around these three groups’ beliefs and values to be reconciled to some degree in order to unite around the mutual goal of students’ potentials being reached.

This research acknowledges the basic power relations that exist in schools and perpetuate larger social issues in society. These power struggles are exposed through sociocultural studies in which values and beliefs are analyzed against institutional structures within and surrounding schools. In Mehan’s (2008) analysis of opportunity to learn from a sociological perspective, he acknowledges that there is distinctive cultural knowledge passed down by families of each social class to their children. “As a consequence, children of the elite classes inherit substantially different cultural knowledge, skills, manners, norms, dress, style of interaction, and linguistic facility” (p. 54). Mehan recognizes the work of Lareau (1989, 2003) in which detailed accounts of how parents form the educational careers of their children while in school. While teachers acknowledge the importance of parent involvement and believe engagement to be a reflection of the values families place on education, not all parents are able to respond to schools in the ways personnel desire. “The quantity and quality of parent involvement are linked to the social and cultural resources” especially “the all important variable of time” (p. 58), which is not usually a luxury for lower socio-economic families. Since dominant culture values tend to reflect the
types of involvement schools seek, parents’ individual cultural beliefs, social constructs or access to resources may limit their ability to meet these expectations. Gee (2008) categorizes culture in terms of “vernacular” or “everyday” ways of being that begin early in life. These ways of using language, acting and being shape how children interact. This “sociocultural perspective amounts to an argument that students learn new academic ‘cultures’ at school, and as in the case of acquiring any new culture, the acquisition of these new cultures interacts formidably with the learners’ initial cultures” (p. 100). While students may gain access to modern school expectations and “cultures,” families may not feel this same familiarity. These large gaps in culture and social structures between home and school may potentially be the greatest barrier to positive partnerships around helping students to succeed academically.

Therefore, this study will compare: the dominant school culture with individual families’ beliefs; and the values surrounding the perceived appropriate role of parents versus the social structures at the school. Through interviews, observations, artifact analysis and making interpretations, I am aware that “Perception is an act of interpretation…Thus, it should not be surprising that even the so-called objective writings of qualitative research are interpretations, not value-free descriptions” (Kincheloe & McLaren, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 414). My interpretations are influenced by my belief that allowing low-income, urban students to continue to fail is unacceptable. This is perpetuated by families’ lack of “social capital” (Coleman, 1988) needed to navigate educational institutions. For low-income, urban students to complete middle school coursework, understand high school options, and gain necessary information about access to higher education, schools must work to involve families and the community (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). By confronting the students’ current struggle to navigate two separate worlds, namely home and school (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003), this
research has the potential to expose areas of power differentials between schools and homes so that all adults can better serve students in partnership.

However, an issue in this research is objectifying a topic that is very subjective – depicting, categorizing, and analyzing individuals’ and groups of individuals’ perceptions. This research is charged with the task of rigorous methodology and transparency of practice to allow for findings that are conclusive within the limits of this research and that answer the research questions. The sociocultural lens assists analysis and enhances validity by explicitly disentangling culture and social structure, which add to the multiple sources of data already triangulated in the research methodology. Through observations I have interpreted behaviors; through artifacts I have corroborated information about social structures in place; and finally, through interviews I have interpreted values. This triangulation of analysis is only possible for these research questions through a sociocultural study. Issues of validity and generalizability are directly addressed through the Maxwell’s approach to a “realist conceptions of validity.”

*The “Realist” Conception of Validity*

“Validity has long been a key issue in debates over the legitimacy of qualitative research” (Maxwell, 1992). Validity is defined by Creswell (2005), as: “the means that researchers can draw meaningful and justifiable inferences” (p. 600). This research relies both implicitly, or the meanings contained within observations and documents to involve parents, as well as explicitly what is said regarding the role of parents in urban middle schools. Both sets of understanding are needed for the legitimacy of this work and to validate the research. The current study takes on a “realist conception” in that this work “sees the validity of an account as inherent, not in the procedures used to produce and validate it, but in its relationship to those things that it intended to account for” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 281). In other words, did this research create plausible
explanations of the perceptions of parents, teachers and administrators regarding parents’ roles and home-school partnerships? For qualitative research, this means that the data produced is accurate and meaningful, which resulted in sound and justifiable conclusions. “Validity, in a broad sense, pertains to this relationship between an account and something outside of that account, whether this something is construed as objective reality, the construction of actors, or a variety of other possible interpretations” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 283). At the conclusion of this study, findings will be shared with participants and the larger school community population, which will assist in validating the findings based on what is done, changed or remains the same at the school.

This qualitative case study employs action research methodology with a reliance on semi-structured interviews of individuals in three groups of stakeholders, observations of meetings and events to which parents are invited, and on artifact analysis of documents obtained from meetings, events or regular communication between parents. But methods or individual data by themselves do not necessarily produce logical and strong arguments for the findings. “Validity is not an inherent property of a particular method, but pertains to the data, accounts, or conclusions reached by using that method in a particular context for a particular purpose” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 284). The data must be collected, analyzed and interpreted in ways that are informed by understanding the viewpoints of each group of stakeholders and the overarching culture of the school community with regards to the parent role. My work with this school as both the principal intern and the coordinator of the School Parent Council allowed me fifteen months of informal observations, accounts, and artifacts previous to formal research study. My experience at the school, building relationships and understanding the culture, add to the legitimacy of the five aspects of validity discussed below.
Descriptive Validity

Descriptive validity essentially is concerned with the “factual accuracy” of the researcher’s account and is the basis for all four other validities (Maxwell, 1992). Maxwell argues that there are two aspects to this validity in need of addressing: The first is the basic technical accuracy of what has been said and done. The second is that what was seen and heard was reported accurately and not inferred based on other data. This also refers to not only what is interpreted, but also to what is omitted from accounts (Maxwell). During this study, I have transcribed all interviews myself in order to remain close to the data, and have collected interviews from various stakeholders simultaneously for constant comparison of data to reach saturation. All observations and artifact analysis were followed up with field notes to reflect my insights and accuracy during or about events, which occur. My ability to accurately describe the people, events and school culture is enhanced by my time spent in association with this school prior to research purposes.

Interpretive Validity

Interpretive validity refers to the attention the researcher has paid to the importance of the events, interactions, meetings, etc. to the participants themselves. As Maxwell (1992) puts it, “I include intention, cognition, affect, belief, evaluation, and anything else that could be encompassed by what is broadly termed the ‘participants’ perspective,’ as well as communicative meaning in a narrower sense” (p. 288). To address these issues, I have sent drafts of findings and interpretations back to participants to check accuracy of perspective. My approach is based on Maxwell’s (1992) assertion that “Interpretive accounts are grounded in the language of the people studied and rely as much as possible on their own words and concepts.” The most important aspect to my findings are that my interpretations of the participants’
situations and perspectives is accurately represented from their viewpoint. In addition, through the work I engage in currently at this school as the School Parent Council coordinator and as a School Site Council representative, I already received voluntary input through comments from people who know my research area. Parents, teachers and administrators often commented on things I should “note” after a meeting or an event, and I welcomed this feedback as authentic perspective.

*Theoretical Validity*

Theoretical validity refers to understanding that “accounts function as an explanation, as well as a description or interpretation of a phenomena” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 291). Theoretical validity combines the two validities above to take interpretation to the level of understanding and connectedness within the larger theoretical sense in terms of action research and sociocultural theory. “Theory has two components: the concepts or categories that the theory employs, and the relationships that are thought to exist among these concepts” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 291). Therefore, both the concepts themselves and the relationship among concepts create theoretical validity. “A good interpretation of anything…takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation” (Geertz, 1973, p. 18). This research is based on the nature of the data collected, the research goals, and both the conceptual and theoretical frameworks employed. Therefore the findings must make logical connections based on data collected through an action research stance and the analysis of this data through sociocultural theory. This qualitative case study is theoretically valid based on the two major theoretical frames employed: practically applying the findings to the current workings of the school through action research; and the sociocultural focus on the potential connections or disjuncture around the belief of the role of parents versus the structures
in place at the school. This validity has looked at description and interpretation, but also theory, to tell an accurate “story” that is also logical within the larger, theoretical sense.

**Generalizability**

Because qualitative studies are not usually designed to be widely generalized, and since the goal of sampling is to use “purposeful sampling” (Patton, 1990), generalizability in this case, refers to the ability to make sense of the particular situation (Becker, 1990). For this study, this also refers to being able to make the findings generalizable throughout this school community, which Maxwell (1992) refers to as “internal generalizability” (p. 293). In this research, findings were corroborated with participants and ultimately presented to the school community to be used in their efforts to raise student achievement and gain more parent engagement at the school. The generalizability is measured by what gets accomplished by the school with the results. If the findings accurately reflect what individual groups of stakeholders believe and then what the general school culture is able to restructure, then this validity will be met in time.

**Evaluative Validity**

Evaluative Validity refers to “the application of an evaluative framework to the objects of study, rather than a descriptive, interpretive, or explanatory one” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 295). In other words, the researcher’s theoretical stance combined with the basis built upon description, interpretation and theory together, bring credibility to the overall evaluation. My critical stance towards the current lack of parent involvement definitely plays a role in this research. Equally important is my belief that in order to improve the structures, experiences and current practices at this school, an understanding of participants’ beliefs and values must first be evaluated. Therefore, based on the descriptions, interpretations, and theoretical lens employed, does the theory espoused seem likely and logically to address the concerns identified in the research
questions? This validity is further addressed in chapter five when the complete “story” and conclusions are presented.

Summary/Preview

This chapter sought to give the reader insight into methodological choices and underlying influential theories. The selected methodologies were driven by the research questions, namely a qualitative case study approach using semi-structured interviews, observations and artifacts. The theoretical frameworks of action research and sociocultural theories were addressed. The samples’ description and method of selection were explained in detail. Together, the formal data collection and analysis strategies were presented within the framework of inductive theory. In chapter four, reports of the data will be presented in terms of the research questions and theoretical frameworks regarding parent involvement. It will be presented through both a written, narrative approach as well as charts and tables that break down the findings into the themes that emerge. In chapter five these findings will be presented in terms of answering the three research questions a discussion of their application to practice, policy and future research, in light of how these conclusions converge and diverge with the existing theoretical frameworks.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents findings, which emerged from the qualitative data gathered during interviews, observations and artifact analysis. A brief introduction to the site, participants, unit of analysis, data sources, analysis process and sociocultural theoretical framework are presented. Next, the ten major themes that emerged from participants through interviews, observations and artifact analysis are discussed. These delineate the findings that surfaced directly from the data regarding this study’s topic of the perceived appropriate role of low-income, urban parents at the middle school level. These findings are presented in written text and interacting theme charts. They are presented alongside my own discussion, which reflects my background of fifteen months at this site prior to this specific research. Using the ten themes that emerged from the data, chapter five will then specifically address the three research questions this study sought to answer, the relation of the findings to the theoretical framework, limitations of the study, and implications for practice, policy and further research.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are parents’, teachers’, and administrators’ perceptions of the appropriate role of parent involvement in low-income, urban middle schools for efforts aimed at raising student achievement?
2. From these three points of view, what factors impact parent involvement aimed at raising student achievement in low-income urban middle schools?
3. How do perceptions of appropriate parent roles influence what transpires, or not regarding student achievement at the school?

From these questions, implications regarding what schools can do collectively to more effectively promote partnerships, as a means to enhance student achievement, have arisen and are also included in the findings.

Introduction to the Site

This study was completed at the Revere School, a low-income, urban middle school in a large Northeast School District, The Roslyn Public Schools. The researcher served as the principal intern for the school year 2007-2008, working with the administration, teachers and school parent council. The work with the school parent council continued during the school year 2008-2009. The data for this specific research was collected in the spring of 2009 over the course of approximately three months, but also reflects the researcher’s background of fifteen prior months at this site.

While interning with the principal of the Revere, this study emerged from my informal observations and conversations with administrators, teachers with administrative duties, teachers and parents around the lack of parent involvement both at this school and middle schools across the district. When I sought current studies regarding middle school parent involvement, the gap in research also became evident. My own beliefs in the importance of involving parents in their children’s education led to my frustration with these adult stakeholders for not having more systematic strategies and consistent practices to guide the culture of the school toward home-school partnerships. In addition, during my own previous teaching practice, I had experienced the power of involving families to raise their own children’s level of achievement, to strengthen relations within the family, and to create relationships between the school and parents. But while...
completing my administrative internship at this site, I did not find that this human resource being
used by any adult parties. Finally, I believe that the high-stakes nature of the middle school years
for putting students on track for college is not emphasized enough in literature or in practice.
This fact should be an impetus for specific middle school parent involvement strategies and
practice, which currently does not exist. While working at the Revere, it became clear that one of
the goals of this middle school is to assist students in setting college as a life goal and
understanding what it takes academically, financially and motivationally to get there. However,
the administration failed to fully address this goal by neglecting to involve families in this same
conversation to help parents promote college aspirations and access.

Aside from the lack of practice of partnering with families at the Revere, I informally
found similar trends during meetings and conversations with all adults in the school community
regarding what these stakeholders thought the appropriate parent role could potentially be at
home and school. But these conversations were occurring in isolation within particular groups,
rather than taking place among and across administrators, teachers and parents. Several themes
and ideas not directly found in the literature also emerged concerning what these stakeholders
felt prevented these parents from becoming involved in this low-income, urban middle school
around student achievement. Therefore, I felt that formal research was needed to determine if
appropriate roles for parents could be agreed upon by administrators, teachers with
administrative duties, classroom teachers and parents committed to raising student achievement.
In so doing, I hoped to also identify unique barriers at the middle level of schooling preventing
this from happening more regularly. Finally, I sought to determine where the breakdown
occurred between the beliefs around parent participation and the practice of creating these
partnerships using the lens of sociocultural theory to analyze the current situation.
The Revere Middle School, located in the Roslyn Public Schools is currently the highest performing middle school in this low-income, urban district based on the state assessment system. This ranking excludes students attending exam schools, and schools that are structured K-8 or 6-12 because these are not traditional middle schools. Since exam schools have students who have tested into their placement, and the K-8 / 6-12 schools have the ability to work with students for longer than the traditional three years of middle school, these schools have advantages that do not allow for analogous comparisons with a school organized for grades 6-8.

In addition to their focus on test scores, the Revere faculty and staff are extremely centered on the school-wide goal of “excellence” for every child, regardless or race, socio-economic status, English proficiency or special needs. An important structure the Revere has put in place to help meet these goals is weekly department meetings in which faculty collaborate on planning, analyze student work, discuss curriculum and share effective pedagogy for this school’s particular student population. This large middle school of approximately 500 students has programming in place to create smaller schools and supports within the larger building. The cluster system creates teams of teachers of mixed content areas who meet and communicate regularly about particular students whom they see in various subject areas. The advisory system has non-teaching staff and administrators meeting with groups of students to discuss real-world issues such as college access, career goals, and financial planning. The student support team consists of a variety of professionals such as the social worker, the school nurse, the student development counselor, department heads, cluster leaders and school administrators to support students and families in crisis. There are school-wide expectations in place for students to learn both study and organizational skills from classroom teachers. The school goal of “Excellence”
for the 2008-2009 school year epitomizes the impressive work that the faculty and staff provide for students.

Despite the incredible collaboration occurring on a daily basis between faculty and students, there is a very weak link between the families and school staff for the majority of the general education population of students to enhance this work during non-school hours at home.

Introduction to the Participants

Overall, this research seeks to increase general parent involvement at the school. Throughout both the literature and my own findings in this study, three groups of parents seem to exist in any school: the completely involved parents who participate no matter what the school does, the age of their children, or the kind of students they have; the group of parents who will not get involved no matter what the school says, does or offers or whether their children are successful or struggling; and the middle-ground group who may or may not participate at the school based on their relationship with their children, the way the school recruits and welcomes them, and whether parents believe that they can actually make a difference in their children’s education. As a diverse, low socio-economic school community at the Revere, the “completely involved” group contains few parents, but the “completely uninvolved” group does as well. The majority of parents can be reached when needed, but either do not know how to get involved, are unaware of events, or do not know that the school staff wants them to be involved. This research focuses only on the “middle-ground parents” in order to find commonalities among all adult stakeholders regarding productive home-school partnerships. When choosing which parents to include, in order to represent larger groups at the school, I aimed at reaching findings for the middle-ground parents, over whom the school may be able to exert some level of influence.
Consequently, in addition to the types of questions asked, observations completed and artifacts analyzed, I carefully selected the particular group of participants.

Parent involvement in a school begins with the relationships between adults, and at this particular middle school these adult stakeholders include administrators, teachers with administrative duties, teachers, and parents. In this research, I sought to find commonalities in perceptions and understandings among these stakeholders regarding the appropriate role parents could play at this low-income, urban middle school. While administrator, teacher and parent roles are commonly understood within schools, “teachers with administrative duties” serve a unique and essential role at the Revere and require further explanation. Within this group, cluster leaders oversee teams of teachers and department heads oversee teachers in particular subject areas. In this school, these are very fundamental roles; cluster leaders provide organization, communication and discipline support for teams of teachers who work with the same sets of students; department heads provide structures for collaboration, strategies for curriculum development, and plans for professional development. Due to their key role in supporting both teachers and administrators, I included these two types of teacher leaders as “teachers with administrative duties” for their unique perspective within the school.

In addition to essential inclusions, I excluded some types of families purposely from this particular research. Since special education teachers and parents tend to have more forced regular contact due to laws and regulations, I felt that special education families and teachers would not accurately represent the amount of regular parent contact with staff actually happening at the school. However, there were two very active parents on the parent council whose participation extends beyond their children’s special needs, so their voices were vital to this research and they were included in interviews. Finally, since parents whose first language is not English tend to
have more barriers to getting involved in schools, I eliminated parents from the Vietnamese cluster of students at this school because these parents have both language and cultural barriers that make participation at the school virtually nonexistent. Since my goal was to seek appropriate roles for parents of the “middle-ground” group, excluding these parents was appropriate for the scope of my study.

I interviewed three administrators at the school, three teachers with administrative duties, four teachers, and six parents. The three administrators that I interviewed all bring the “big picture” perspective to this data. They not only work to support teachers, but they also work with the broadest range of parents on student academics, social conflicts and emotional issues. They are privy to files and information that teachers do not necessarily receive. At this school, these three administrators are all highly devoted and believe that each child can and should go onto the high school and college of their choice. They work long hours and want to see this school continue to achieve more. These three are also in the unique position of actually having a great deal of contact directly with students as well as faculty and parents. I interviewed the principal, the vice principal and the student development counselor. While the principal and vice principal are clearly defined as administrators, the student development counselor’s job description on paper may not seem administrative, she works directly with students and families in several roles: when families are in crisis; to help make high school choices; around issues with staff; and students transition to the middle school. At this particular setting however, both her general administrative duties and their specific relationship to the principal, makes her a pivotal administrator.

The teachers with administrative duties are essential to this research as well, as this group serves in department head or cluster leader roles. The Department heads not only run weekly
department meetings, but they also serve as curriculum leaders, informally supervise teachers and analyze data regarding student achievement. The cluster leaders essentially serve in a dean capacity for a particular group(s) of students and team(s) of teachers. They are the first line of teacher support regarding behavior and discipline issues, therefore making the most negative contact with families. In particular, of the three participants that I interviewed, two serve as both department heads (one of English and one of math) and as cluster leaders, and the third has several clusters under his supervision.

Teachers obviously have the most contact with students in both an academic and social capacity. Therefore, ideally teachers have the most regular contact with parents, both positive and negative, and to both give and gain information from families. As middle school students undergo great transitions during the sixth, seventh and eighth grade years, it is important for parents to speak with teachers at all grade levels, as they can express the vast differences in student development, even within the middle school years. Also, based on varying parental participation needed in different subjects, interviewing across subject areas was important. Among the teachers interviewed, three teachers have both sixth and seventh grade students and one teacher has both seventh and eighth grade students. A math, a science, an English Language arts / social studies, and an elective / English Language Arts teacher each participated.

Finally, parents of course have their own beliefs about their role in their children’s education: interviewing a range of parents was essential to this research. This study is intended to define a more appropriate role for parents at the middle school level that takes into account the differences between middle school structures, ages of students and content demands from the elementary years. The role definition, which emerged from this study, is intended for parents of the “middle-ground group” of parents to increase overall home-school partnerships. Therefore,
this research included interviews of two groups of parents: the completely involved parents to gain ideas for productive and meaningful participation they have partaken in and the middle-ground parents to seek more non-traditional ways that they may already consider involvement. Although this research is focused on the middle ground group, it was important to gain the ideas of both the middle ground group and highly involved in order to find a realistic set of roles for a broader group of parents. More informally, various parents representing a range of participation were involved through observations of events and meetings, and in analyzing the artifacts.

Six parents were interviewed in order to represent a range of student grade levels, racial backgrounds, and varying involvement at the school. Two sixth-grade parents, two seventh-grade parents and two eighth-grade parents chose to participate. Of these, two are white, two are Hispanic and two are of black descent. Four of these parents are more traditionally involved in events at both the school and parent council in addition to their own participation with their children’s education. Of the four who are highly involved, three are women who are married and one is a single dad. Two of the parents are less traditionally involved, but remain in close contact with teachers through the phone and email, and directly with their children at home. Of these two, one is a married man and one is a single women.
Table 1 Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Race</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kerri</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenna</td>
<td>Teacher with Administrative Duties</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cluster leader / Department Head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>Teacher with Administrative Duties</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cluster Leader / Department Head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Teacher with Administrative Duties</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cluster Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Introduction to the Data Sources

Given the topic of research, I did not feel that surveys or statistics could provide findings that adequately described such a personal, relationship-based topic that involved multiple stakeholders and is exploratory in nature due to the insufficient existing literature. Therefore, I chose to use three forms of data collection for this qualitative study. I interviewed 16 participants regarding what they believe the appropriate role of low-income, urban middle school parents to be in their children’s education, observed all meetings and events in March, April and May of 2009 to which parents were invited, and analyzed documents used to communicate with parents.
The interviews were completed over a period of two months, and all but two were completed at the Revere School (one parent was interviewed in his home and one at her workplace). Four interview protocols were used, including one for each stakeholder group, but all four had questions within the same topics and were similarly worded. Semantics varied to meet each group’s purpose and needs within the interview (see Appendices A-D). While the structured questions remained the same for all participants within each group, occasional clarifying or probing questions were used to gain further insights into an idea or concept explored by a participant. These interviews were transcribed exactly as stated and are used within the data. The interviews took between 30 and 60 minutes depending on the length of answers. Each participant was given the same introduction to the study and given the option to receive a copy of the transcription and/or the final study. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed within 48 hours by the researcher. After each interview, field notes were recorded regarding themes that were repeated, topics participants seemed unsure of, ideas that were new to the study, and/or statements that seemed to resonate with other participants’ descriptions. All 16 interviews gave insights regarding the appropriate role that individuals, groups and the overall school community believed parents could play at the middle school level, despite the unique barriers of a low-income, urban school neighborhood.

While the interviews provided the most abundant and rich data in describing the values and beliefs within the school community, the artifacts and observations were important to triangulate this data for confirmation. Then comparisons could be made regarding beliefs and values with the lived actions and behaviors transpiring or not throughout the school community.

The observations consisted of the February Open House, both school parent council and school site council meetings in March, April and May, the Teacher Appreciation Breakfast
hosted by the parent council, the third quarter honor roll ceremony, the Revere Extreme
Makeover Day (hosted by a local city business), and the incoming sixth grade parent/child
orientation evening held in May. All of these events were either led / co-led by parents or invited
gamilies to attend. In addition to the period of formal research, I had spent fifteen months prior to
that working at the school. I was in attendance at an abundance of other events and meetings in
which parents, teachers, teachers with administrative duties, and administrators were all present.
Prior to the formal research period, I was an active participant at these events and meetings.
During formal research collection, I became more of an observer. Although at times it was
natural for me to participate and give background on previous events or information on structures
at the school, I took on a much less active role to ensure that I was able to take notes and remain
more objective about the ideas and proceedings transpiring within the school community. At
school parent council meetings, it was especially important that I was less active, as I was
additionally transferring the leadership of the group completely to the parents after two years of
leading these myself. Having had access to and having been an active participant in these events
and meetings provided the ability to observe stakeholders more naturally and gain authentic
insights into the beliefs and social structures within the school setting.

The artifacts analyzed included any sources of information provided to parents,
documents used for the purpose of communication with families, agendas and minutes from
meetings in which parents were involved, and literature passed out during events to inform
parents of broader school happenings and their respective children’s academic progress. Since
these documents were created for purposes other than research, their usage in analysis was
selective. However, they provide straightforward information as to the types, the number and the
ways in which parents are invited and required to participate at the school. Additionally, the
absence of certain documents, and the way in which others were presented, was as informative as the existing documents. Vast information was gained from the lack of certain documents or the way in which documents were presented. For example, there is no monthly newsletter to provide parents with general information, no mandated regular communication of individual grades, and not all documents sent home are translated into the languages of the families. Therefore my analysis included both the existing documents, and just as significantly, the absence and/or deficiencies of documents.

**Units of Analysis within Data Sources**

In using these three sources of data, the units of analysis including individuals’ beliefs, particular stakeholder group values, and overarching whole school community culture, each became apparent. Through interviews, both individual and stakeholder group principles can be drawn from the data. The use of observations and artifact analysis then allows the overarching viewpoints and priorities regarding parent involvement within the school culture to be disentangled. While all three data sources are more easily analyzed separately, together these three sources of data show the relational effects these three units have with one another.

**Introduction to the Analysis Process**

In particular, when analyzing the data, the 10 major themes that emerged directly from the data, driven by participants, rather than by researcher priorities, were pulled from across all 16 interviews and present in artifact analysis and during observations. In using HyperResearch to organize the data and to understand each theme, I had to look across all participants and data sources since they are all so closely intertwined. I completed first-order/initial codes, and then second-order codes consisting of data chunked into themes. The final analysis stage consisted of a comparison phase to ensure that all ideas were captured accurately and resonated within these
themes. This was essential to truly capture the participant viewpoints and to minimize my own interpretations and thoughts to cloud the emerging data. At this point, having first transcribed and then analyzed all collected data through four rounds, I was familiar not only with individuals ideas, but also with themes resonating from stakeholder groups and from the overall school culture around home-school partnerships. Therefore, when I looked at each particular research question and the implications for practice at this school, the forms of analysis varied.

For research question one, when looking at the perceived appropriate role parents could have in their children’s academic lives, it was important that the data were first analyzed by stakeholder sets of participants to ensure that within groups, the definitions of parent roles paralleled one another before trying to compare across the various stakeholders. Once individual beliefs reflected a group belief, I looked across all sets for commonalities to redefine the parent role at this middle level of schooling. For research question number two, the factors that directly affect parent involvement at this particular case of study were easily definable across all groups as they had emerged from the themes driven directly by participants. Therefore, to plainly categorize these, analyzing across all participants and sources provided the most accurate findings. This information then naturally formed distinct categories of factors. Since I had remained close to the data, having been through all pieces approximately six times at this point, the third research question’s premise had emerged in the form of paradoxes versus priorities within the whole school culture. Specifically, there are few values and beliefs that matched actions and behaviors occurring in the school by either school staff or parents. More regularly, there are positive and ideal viewpoints that exist around home-school partnerships, but partnerships are not actually transpiring or being made a priority from the perspective of either
the school staff or the parents. Without all three forms of data to compare, the convergences and
the paradoxes of values and beliefs versus action and behavior could not have been possible.

*Analysis Using the Sociocultural Theoretical Framework*

In relation to the theoretical framework of the sociocultural theory, these three sources of
data provided the complete picture of the information needed in order to compare the values and
beliefs of the role parents play with the actions and behaviors actually transpiring at school and
home. Sociocultural theory seeks to compare the culture, or how people interpret their
experience, with social structures, or the actual actions taken. In this study, I am seeking to
compare the culture and social contexts of the adult relationships at this school to find
commonalities and discontinuities that may assist the stakeholder groups in defining productive
parent roles to help raise student achievement. For the specific data sources, the interviews were
used to more deeply explore the values and beliefs around each unit of analysis: individuals,
stakeholder groups, and the whole school community. The artifacts then provided a relatively
more objective viewpoint of the social structures in place used to invite and seek parent
participation at the school. Equally important in this data is the lack of artifacts that represent
parent invitations or demands. It is also essential to note that while the majority of Roslyn
district-wide general information is available in multiple languages, most documents from the
Revere School are not translated. Finally, the observations provide a place where the values and
beliefs can be seen, heard and felt within the social structures in place, such as open houses,
parent council meetings and events at the school. I examined the events for which the school
staff seeks parent participation most consistently and at which proceedings are more heavily
attended. While interview participants may answer questions attempting to please the interviewer
and artifacts can be misleading since their purpose is other than research, observations allow for naturalistic, more raw interpretations of how beliefs and actions converge or diverge.

Findings Overview (Themes 1-10)

Although the interview questions followed a particular format in order to reach findings regarding each research question, I found that several themes consistently emerged from participants themselves. Although some themes reflect answers to actual research questions, the 10 themes presented in this chapter were more frequently and deeply spoken of, even without prompting throughout each interview. When looking at observations completed and artifacts analyzed, in spite of research questions directly asked, these particular themes emerged from these data sources. These major topic areas were not driven by my research questions. Instead, by presenting this personally, professionally and relationally driven topic of home-school partnerships to several stakeholders in this school community, participants’ responses, concerns, and ideas are revealed. The passionate, resourceful and hopeful reactions gave great insight into the knowledge that stakeholders are not pleased with the current level of home-school partnerships, but had never directly been given the opportunity or time to discuss the possibilities it could have for student achievement, family relations and a more positive working atmosphere at the school. The following 10 themes are presented in this section, each in isolation, for purely definitional purposes. In the summary that follows the 10 themes, the interacting effects, convergences, and discontinuities are explored.
### Table 2 Summary of Themes / Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Derived from First Order Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication as the Core Component of Parent Involvement</td>
<td>Communication between adults; communication for events and meetings; the use of family analogies regarding communication; the adults cannot rely on students to communicate for them; and redefining parent involvement at the middle school level around communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Forms of Communication</td>
<td>Communication in multiple ways; communication depending on the child and the family; the use of email for more regular communication; extreme cases are the focus of communication (mostly negative, but some positive turnarounds); communication depends on family situations; multiple forms of communication are needed; and school persistence in communication is necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Connections Between Home and School</td>
<td>Adult expectations of each other; connections made between home and school; communication between parent and</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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child about school; a culture shift at the
school about parent involvement; a
connection between adults based on a focus
on students; relationships between adults;
school and home consistent about the
importance of education; and united front
between home and school.

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<tr>
<th>Age of Students</th>
<th>Age group challenges; age group needs guidance; age of students; age group needs structure; age group needs to take responsibility; focus on middle school as preparation for high school; parents get less involved as children get older; and the sixth grade to eighth grade transition.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Factors</td>
<td>The young age of parents; parents’ beliefs about education; communication can be intimidating for a parent; language barriers; parents’ beliefs about parenting; parent cultural background; gap in knowledge of what parent involvement means versus parent involvement as natural; parents’ experience in own schooling; parent paradoxes (saying one thing, but not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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following through); parents’ own general
background; parenting roles’ impact on the
classroom; parents treat middle school kids
as older than they are; parents’
understanding that influences the child’s
education; parents’ references to own
parents and families’ example.

School Factors

Accessibility to the school; busing affect
since these are not neighborhood schools;
communication with parents can be
intimidating to school personnel; district
communication / messages regarding
middle schools; image of middle schools;
lack of protocol and training for school
personnel; location of the school; middle-
ground kids fall through the cracks of the
school community; paradox of school
personnel saying one thing and doing
another; lack of positive school
communication; lack of positive school
events; lack of active recruitment of parents
by school personnel; school
communication gap; frequent negative
school communication; and the teacher
approach to parents.

Time as Factor for Everyone Involved

Time as a factor; and the need for a parent
liaison.

Parent Roles

Parents’ basic awareness of a child’s daily
education and experiences; parents’
awareness of homework and events;
parents’ balancing independence with
control; parents’ keeping contact
information at the school updated; parents’
using time at the school to network for
child’s benefits; parent attendance at the
school as priority; parents’ disappointment
with lack of other parents’ involvement;
parent councils are small; parent advocacy
role; parent attendance at open houses;
parent awareness of homework; parent
initiation of communication; parent
introduction to resources for kids; parent
responsiveness to grades; parent
relationship with child; parent role at
home; parent role at school; and parents’
school choice within the district.
School Roles

Administration’s role in creating the culture for school personnel; administration sets the tone for school personnel; school personnel being open to working with all families; implications for school-wide practice by school-personnel; parents as resource for school personnel; parent liaison on staff to focus and lead the school personnel; positive communication by school personnel; positive events initiated by school personnel; school personnel provides appropriate education; school personnel communicates care for students; school personnel knowledge of age group shared with parents; school personnel accessibility for parents; and school personnel roles in creating parent partnerships.

Traditional Roles

Parents’ role in budget input; parents role in budget decisions; parents’ role in curriculum input; parents’ role in curriculum decisions; parents’ role in fundraising and events; parents’ role in
fundraising; parents’ role in the hiring process; parents’ overall input in school decisions; parents’ role in professional development choices for staff; parents’ role in the school council and parent council; and parents’ traditional involvement roles.

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**Communication as Core Component of Parent Involvement**

The first and most prominent theme that resonated in every single interview, was discussed at all meetings and brought up at events is that communication between adult stakeholders as the key to participation at the middle school level. This theme derived from all participants agreeing that the level of communication between home and school must increase for this age group of students. During the middle school years, the students themselves are relying more on peer interactions for their own decision-making and often testing adult boundaries by pitting adult requests and decisions against one another. The classic, “Mom said no, so I will go ask dad” manipulation is present. But in a low-income, urban setting where often children are raised in single-parent houses, more frequently this tactic translates into, “My teacher said this, or my parent said that,” often in opposition to what the adult present is asking the student to do. Students of this age do not necessarily want or need parent volunteers in the school during the day, nor do they require help from parents directly in completing homework. However, this age group needs (although may not want) adults at home and school communicating with one another about academic, social and emotional progress or struggles, all while conveying a common message that education matters. The idea of communication as the
essential element of involvement for this age group is very clearly stated by Brian, an administrator:

I like to define active parents as parents who are involved via phone, via email, even if they cannot come up to the schools. Because the kids know that and they know that their parents are going to know exactly what is going on, even if they can’t be part of the traditional school structures of parents, such as school council or school site council or come to the open houses because of their work schedule.

The concept of communication as the central and defining role of parents at the middle level of schooling is more complex than just adults speaking with one another. Nathan described it as an understanding that communication is more than just congenial, but also has academic purpose. “I think there needs to be a shift in ideology of how we communicate and why we communicate. You know, what is the value in communicating.” The essential nature of communication must center on academics and expectations. During an interview, Keith, a teacher with administrative duties, admitted that he had never thought of parent involvement as a means to raise student achievement.

I am intrigued with the partnership on academic achievement, because that is usually the part that is left out. Usually parents are just fundraisers and that is not necessarily the best way to go. Especially since they have a much better handle on their own kids’ learning styles and what would work. I think kids are more at ease with their parents. You see the real kid as opposed to the kid that is trying to pretend to be whatever or whomever at school.
This role is traditionally placed on teachers to communicate with parents what is happening at school, but two separate parents in their interviews expressed the importance of communication being a two-way path. Olivia, a parent, said:

Oh definitely [the role] is to participate. I think it’s an even exchange; it’s the responsibility of the parent as well as the teacher while the child is here. And the two of them, there needs to be a lot of communication between the parents and teachers. That is my firm belief.

Edward, a parent, emphasized that although schools tend to have the burden of communication, home-school partnerships are really about mutual exchanges.

I want to let you know that it is not the school. It is always about parents and teachers, and you know, people getting involved with one another. It is the truth. I mean there is no way [student achievement] is going to happen without that.

Brenna, a teacher with administrative duties emphasized the large caseloads that teachers are faced with: “I say to parents all the time, “Some of these teachers teach 100 plus students. You have how many kids? That is it in your life.’ So it is unrealistic to think that it is the teacher’s job to go to [parents].” The burden of communication must fall equally to both parties. However, the obligation of communication is complicated not only by teachers’ caseloads, but also by their students’ complex families and life contexts.

Communication in a diverse setting is convoluted even more by the individual values and beliefs held within the school community. Nathan, a teacher, brought this up as experiencing seven years at this school and recognizing his need to anticipate issues in working with multicultural families.
So in working in a very culturally diverse school, you have to really understand
the cultures to respond to parents and how the parents are going to respond to you,
so it makes it difficult, but that is kind of the reality of working in an urban type
of school district.

Despite the vast differences in cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, remaining focused on
the child’s success is most beneficial. Kate, a teacher, spoke of overcoming differences in
cultural or linguistic values through flexibility that teachers must be open to in terms of being
contacted by and in making contact with parents. This flexibility is based on making the shared
goal of doing what is best for the child the focus of every conversation.

I think a lot of it is your approachability. You know, how you interact with people
makes a big difference. And if you can make them feel comfortable and present
yourself in a way that is like, you know I am trying to make your kid succeed and
help your kid succeed and this is what I need. I think parents really respond to
that. If you approach them in that, I need you to help me get to this goal for your
kid.

Additionally, in an economically challenged setting, single-parent homes are common and
students seek ways to take advantage of situations where parents and teachers may not be in
contact with one another. Kate referred to the importance of a united front between home and
school, not only for helping the school best serve the children, but also to provide supports for
parents.

Because I think it’s kind of the whole theory of, mom said no, so I am going to go
ask dad. If they see a united front, they are going to know I can get away with this
and this, but that is where my limit is. And I think if that is consistent across their
life whether they are at school or at home, that is going to make a difference in how far they push.

In this low-income, urban setting with many single-parent homes, homes with two working parents, or extended family raising students, uniting to guide students in productive paths is helpful for both the school staff and for the parents.

Making student achievement the partnership goal between home and school is especially important for students in this age group. Not only are middle schools preparing students for high school, but they are also developing study habits and attitudes toward school that remain through higher schooling and may motivate them on toward college. The added challenge of multiple subjects with numerous teachers can cause a breakdown in communication that could be detrimental to a child’s academic and social and emotional well-being. At this adolescent age, students need to recognize that a common, mutually-valued respect exists. A stance at their school where their home culture is valued and an attitude at home where school is valued is necessary. This can occur when these adults know and respect one another personally and professionally. Grace, a parent, described developing a culture:

And I think that either [the culture of respect for one another] has to come from the teachers and it has to come from the parent. And each school has a different culture, so I am thinking, you know, every school can develop its own culture, but I think that is how it is done. I do think that parents and teachers should have communication about the child and how they are doing, especially in middle school because there are so many social issues.

But this culture cannot be developed unless both parents and teachers are willing to communicate about what the home-school partnership’s purpose is and how it will be carried out. The culture
around communication at the school must be focused on making a clear and tangible connection for students between home and school so that they are not constantly navigating two separate worlds. Regardless of how communication is carried out, it is clearly a priority of all participants at this school. Grace, a parent, emphasized the need to create this culture around regular opportunities to connect:

Information is not always as forthcoming, so I think in some ways, we need to find some place where parents and teachers make contact on a monthly basis or every couple of months. Um, because I think you can go through the whole year without meeting a teacher. And I somehow feel that there is, something is going to get missed, something gets missed when you don’t have that contact.

Similarly, Todd, a teacher with administrative duties, acknowledged how much value he has found in partnering with parents. “I have seen some great things happen from communication with a parent and seeing a kid, you know, get in line a lot quicker than when just trying to talk it out with a student myself.” Communication between home and school has the potential to be a powerful force for this school. The small minority of parents who are highly involved have acknowledged and experienced the benefit in which an open line of contact can result. The challenge is in finding ways to get a large majority of the general population of parents more actively involved to promote individual students’ academic success.

In addition to the interview discussions of the importance of communication between home and school, it was also a topic at most parent council meetings. This idea arose not as an item on the agenda, but as the topic of conversations around supporting the school and helping parents to help students take advantage of the resources already available at the school. This was such an important topic to these parents that they requested a special meeting with the principal
in January 2009 to discuss the possibilities of more regular and consistent forms of communication that could be made available, such as a website, using the voicemail all-call system more often and a monthly newsletter. The small group of parents who attend parent council monthly are proud of the number of positive events and initiatives happening during the school day with their students. However, they felt that the majority of families were uninformed and could not help their students make choices, nor could they become more productively involved at the school without more consistent forms of communication. Therefore, with the awareness of the principal’s busy schedule, three parents (including Mary, Grace and John) either on their day off or after arranging to arrive at work late, met with the principal and myself early one Tuesday morning in January to express how strongly they all felt about regular communication itself as the key to more effective partnerships with families. Although not asked to represent the other families, these three parents represent what many families probably feel, but may not be comfortable or willing to come up to the school to request.

The parents’ main concern is the lack of regular communication that goes home with their children, through mail, through voicemail or even the Internet. They expressed an interest in a monthly newsletter with information for families about events, meetings or curriculum updates. This request derived from frustrations verbalized by parents at the council meeting because of finding out about events or meetings at the school after they have passed. The administrators felt that paper handouts were both outdated in general and often do not make it home given the age level of students. Instead, the creation of a school website page was discussed at length as a tool. However, this was never finished during the 2008-2009 school year. In addition, parents spoke of making the available “all-call” voicemails that go home to all families of the school a more regular occurrence on a consistent day of the week. If families
could expect updates in this way they may set an answering machine if necessary or be vigilant about checking messages. However, throughout the year, the all-call system continued to be used piecemeal for major events such as state testing or report card open houses. The problem with both the content and timing of these all-call voicemails is that they were for big academic events that do not necessarily have positive connotations for students or families, and they are sent on the week of the event, making it difficult for some parents to take off from work in advance to attend an open house or a parent council meeting. The administration’s reasoning for fewer calls was expressed as a concern about the overuse of this message system for fear that parents would stop listening. Thus, it was used sparingly and as close to events as possible so that families remembered the dates and times. When the reasoning behind being afraid to overuse the all-call system was brought to parents’ attention, they expressed both their familiarity and appreciation of these messages from elementary school. While there is agreement from all stakeholders that communication is the key to parent involvement and awareness in order to able to support the school or talk with their children about school, it is less clear what form notifications of events, meetings and happenings at the school could or should take.

Therefore, similar to this theme of communication in general as the expanded form of parent involvement at the middle school level is a direct connection to the second theme, the use of multiple forms of communication, which also arose throughout this study in all data sources. This theme is the need to employ multiple forms of communication in order to reach the large number of and diversity within the parent/guardian population. This same theme arose at each parent council meeting, was present during this meeting of the parent council with the principal, and was an evident need based on the lack of artifacts to analyze regarding regular communication with families. The need for multiple forms of communication that include
various languages and medias to give parents insight and opportunity regarding positive events, opportunities and special recognitions that students themselves receive at the school.

*Multiple Forms of Communication*

This second theme, which closely follows the need to define home-school partnerships at this level of schooling through communication between the school and parents, arises from the need to have multiple forms of communication in order to reach the diverse types of low-income, urban families this school serves. In this theme, it became important that both teachers and the school administration were willing to correspond in multiple ways. These various forms should cater to working parents and parents of various cultural, ethnic, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds, who may not have the time to come to school for meetings or even have a baseline understanding of the American education system. This theme refers to educators being eager to communicate regularly via phone and email with families, in addition to through more traditional notices home, phone calls and meetings. But simultaneously, given the socioeconomic status of these families, it is important for parents that not all communication from school to home is done via technology since not every family has access to these resources, nor is able to use or afford them.

This theme emerged from participants in relation to the lack of communication with families in general and regarding their children more specifically. In general, parents are discontented with the amount of communication concerning positive school news, events and meetings. Individual families desire more regular communication directly between teachers and parents regarding students’ academic progress. All parties are frustrated by the fact that neither the school personnel nor the general parent population contact one another regularly either for academic check-ins or for positive reports. Consistent correspondence occurs only for students
with major behavioral or negative academic issues. Nathan, a teacher, forthrightly admitted this lack of regular and positive communication. “Communication is pretty consistent across the grades…[its primarily] in terms of when students do something inappropriate and wrong.” At the same time, the acknowledgement of a recent increase and push for more contact with one another has been made throughout the school community in order to unite around raising student achievement, especially given the high-stakes testing era of schooling. Kate, a teacher, stated,

And sending the calls home. I feel like the more, it is like instruction. The more modes of instruction, the more likely something is going to stick. The more ways you try to get something home to the parents, the more likely that someone is going to respond. So trying everything that is possible. And that seems to be more and more what we are trying to do.

Before delving more deeply into this theme, I would like to present two major concerns that I believe come with this theme from my observations and experience of working within this school. Although most stakeholders felt that all-call phone voicemails, a website and emails were the key to more regular communication, they did not account for the lack of personal touch these forms of contact create. Also, despite stakeholders feeling that making communication available in multiple ways would reach more families, they did not speak about how to make all these channels known to families initially so that access followed. Therefore, my two reservations about this theme are as follows: The first is that by using all of these multiple technological forms of communication, the personal touch can and will get lost without also finding ways to have parents and faculty come together more often. The lack of personal meetings between teachers and parents in a culturally diverse community can be detrimental to the relationships and trust that needs to be formed in order for students to see parents and teachers as united in
their education. My second concern is that although these multiple forms do need to be established in order to reach the greatest number of families possible, they must first be developed and then communicated to parents consistently so that complete awareness of resources and access to the school are attainable for all families.

Despite these cautions, this theme derived from data around practical strategies to keep parents better informed to help support expanding the definition of parent involvement to include parents who can only be accessed remotely via phone or email. For many families, expanding the definition of involvement to technological connections would be a positive step not only toward awareness of school events and meetings, but it could also potentially be used regarding curriculum, school policies, extra-curricular opportunities and student accomplishments. In addition, having this information opens up channels of communication about school between parents and students. Brian, an administrator, stated:

I think in Roslyn, what is critical, because the schools draw from such a large geographic area, is making multiple, making information available in multiple ways… I think what it comes down to is there is not a parent out there that wants their kid to fail, and it is a matter of us figuring out, for parents that aren’t sure how to help the kid, we have to figure out how to get the information out.

Having spent two years working with these stakeholders, and particularly given the conversations I observed this year during school parent council meetings, figuring out how to get information out is more complicated than what it may seem on the surface. There is the issue of determining possible and consistent forms of communication that fit with staff schedules and already-loaded job descriptions. There is the issue of knowing what forms of communication actually work for the majority of parents. And finally, whom the responsibility falls upon to not
only gain this information but then to initiate and carry out ideas. During interviews and observations, many school personnel expressed the desire to have parents create newsletters and recruit other parents for fundraisers and events. Simultaneously, many parents spoke of the school’s need to create newsletters, make more phone calls and create a working website.

Despite working through logistics, stakeholders had many of their own ideas for consistent, yet various ways to communicate with parents. Brenna, a teacher with administrative duties, still saw the value in a monthly paper newsletter:

One thing that I was thinking about for next year that would be really good is putting out a newsletter every month. We don’t really have that. The principal really hasn’t put that together. And it is nothing in the grand scheme, but again, if you have a question, you can flip back to that. And again, it is just one of those ‘hi, we are communicating with you, we are just doing our part.’ And I don’t think that we do that. I wish we also had a better website.

Todd, a teacher with administrative duties, also spoke of the need for technology use through email for the security of ensuring that parents receive and can respond to messages from staff:

I would love to have every parent’s email address. You know, it’s quick, it’s, but a lot of [parents] don’t have it or for whatever reason. It is so much easier than the phone. You know because you know that eventually when they open up the inbox, it will be there. Whereas with voicemail, you don’t know if they are ever going to get it because if the child is getting home before the parent, you know, erased.

Although many parents now have cell phones, which could eliminate this problem, staff find that these numbers change frequently or are out of service at various times. Currently the school does
not have access to all parents’ email addresses. As the situation stands now, if parents do not attend the first open house, teachers are unable to get parent email addresses. Keith, a teacher with administrative duties, thought that emergency cards could attain these contacts for the school.

We will do a parent newsletter for the principal, but I was thinking that if the emergency cards could compile an email address and form a database. Um, it would be a good way to just, keeping track, to keep in touch with the parents, which wouldn’t cost us anything.

This idea combines the use of email with the website for parents’ usage. Not only keeping email addresses for daily needs, but for long-term newsletters that could be uploaded onto the website for parents to gain information. For Denise, a single mom who is unable to attend most school events, but is considered by the staff as involved, emailing and calling are her ways of participating in her son’s schooling:

I email teachers. That is another great tool right now that I find. It’s technology. If I want to know something, it is a click away. I will email and I will have information, not the same day, but it is awesome, it is quick. If I don’t do that, then I do letters. I write to the school, to the teachers and I will send it with him. And I will follow up with him. And everyday, I will ask him, ‘what is your project? What are you doing? What is coming up? Technology not only allows this parent to communicate with the adults in her child’s academic life, but also for her to communicate to her son a message consistent with that of the school.

Similar to websites and email, the technology and usage of cell phones and the all-call voicemails that go directly to either a home phone number or cell phone number of each family
at the school have made both parents and staff more accessible to one another and privy to
important information. Keith, a teacher with administrative duties, spoke about his use of their
cell phone. “Cell phones. I would like to be away from my office as much as possible and
whether I am outside the building or not, parents can get in touch with me.” Being accessible
throughout the day helps parents who work jobs with odd hours to be able to have the important
conversations with teachers or administrators. Having access to regular information regarding
events and meetings in general for the school is also essential. Several stakeholders spoke of the
use of all forms to ensure that parents get messages and remain informed. Grace, a parent, spoke
of using these forms more consistently at this school so that she could help her child make more
decisions and take advantage of opportunities.

The phone tree, which I think is good, as long as the kids don’t forget to save it,
or, um, the occasional flyers, but we are not getting a whole lot of flyers. Um,
newsletters I like, but we don’t do one here at the school. But in previous schools
we have done newsletters. Um, the list serve, the parent list serve at my other
child’s school is very informative because it gives you all the activities that are
going on and you can make choices as to where you can get involved and where
you can encourage your child to get involved and you, giving them a little food
for thought about joining this club or that club. So email definitely. I think email
is a good way of reaching teachers and communicating. But like I said, I haven’t
done as much of it as I could. And like I said, I thought maybe they could work on
that a little more and encourage that. If all the teachers have bought into that, I am
not sure that they all have.
It is evident from this active parent's comments that families and faculty have not even come together to discuss these possibilities. Without these conversations, everyone’s “systems” seem to vary. Beth, a teacher, spoke of all that she does at the beginning of the year.

I send a letter home at the beginning of the year. I try to call parents. I do my homeroom and I try to get through some of the others. Sometimes. Some of the parents who often send back the letter, will send back an email also, so that is a quick, easy way during the day to shoot off an email and they can respond back to me when they have time, which is also good, which is nice because they don’t feel bothered at work.

The problem in all of this at the beginning of the year is that if parents do not follow-through initially, the teacher then remains in contact with just those families that have responded. In addressing the needs of students in this age group, the use of multiple forms of communication not only to initiate contact, but also to follow up on other forms of communication can be just as essential. Todd, a teacher with administrative duties, spoke of this issue:

When I send a letter home telling a parent [something negative], than I need to follow that up with a phone call. Because maybe the parent doesn’t know that this kid got the letter and they are saying good-bye in the morning, I am off to school and then they are in downtown Roslyn for the day. So that is something that I know I need to work on. But other parents will say, I can’t make it up that day or I can’t make it up tomorrow and I will get there when I can. But if they do that with a phone call to me, the phone call is usually enough for me to say what I need to say.
This flexibility and willingness to communicate via phone and email is particularly essential from the school’s end in order to accommodate parents with multiple or odd hour jobs.

However, all these forms can only begin with the families making the initial contact with the school in order to give the proper information and to let staff know the best ways to communicate with them. Edward, a parent who is unable to be involved in councils or events, but keeps in regular contact with his child’s teachers said,

“You are creating [relationships] from the beginning. It just, ah, the open house that we came to, every open house, every time there is something going on in school, or even just an email, maybe once or twice a month saying, ‘Hey, how is my daughter doing?’ Or just trying to follow up or whatever, you know, they will drop you an email. You do not have to set up appointments all the time.

This parent spoke several times during the interview about how the initial contact with teachers where contact information was shared and his expression of wanting to support the teacher, made a difference throughout the year. Now, if this parent does not hear from a teacher each month, he emails or calls to check in. But oftentimes, the teachers contact him first because they not only know he is responsive, but also that it makes a difference in this child’s academic focus.

The relationships Edward has initiated and has been able to maintain with teachers has shown his daughter that school does not end when the school bell rings at 1:30pm. Rather, her education helps her with life at home and her home life will help her succeed in school. Creating this unified front for students at this age to see is essential during these tumultuous and transitional years of schooling. Defining parent involvement as home-school partnerships through regular communication and then making those contacts in multiple ways helps create the
connection between home and school. This idea of connecting families and staff arose as another major theme regarding home school partnerships at the middle school level of schooling.

Creating Connections between School and Home

The themes around communication serve the ultimate goal of creating connections for students between home and school. In a culturally diverse school community, it is essential that educators have knowledge of and can connect to students’ home lives, information they gain from consistent meetings and communication with families. At this middle level of schooling, it is important for adolescents to see all adults in their lives connected as they develop academic habits, social skills, character traits, and emotional resilience. Parents, in order to be able to support the school’s academic work with their children, need to have an understanding of the school’s mission, procedures and routines, curriculum standards, and resources available to support their children. Finally, an even exchange of expectations must occur between school personnel and parents so that everyone can help students develop and attain positive goals for the future. The theme of the need for connection between home and school life for students was expressed by every participant and arose during meeting observations and open house conferences. Brian, an administrator, stated the central argument for creating connections to raise student achievement:

So I think that what needs to happen is a really strong connection between school and home… I think that that is the way for families to connect on what is expected on both ends. I mean we should also know what the parents expect of us. It is certainly not a one-way street. Um, but really just getting that message across to kids that we are all in this together. And you know, we’re a unified team and so that the work gets done and the studying gets done and all of that.
This connection theme is derived from the idea that at the middle school level of schooling, in order to help raise student achievement, adolescents must recognize a mutual partnership between school personnel and their caretakers. What was immediately clear is that all adults agree students need to see home and school as united in order to be perceived as partners. The purpose of these connections is not as clearly agreed upon.

For many of the school personnel, they spoke of the connection as a means to gain support of the school. Dana, an administrator, stated, “The teacher should always be reaching out for an opportunity to connect with the parent because the parent is the catalyst for getting the child to do what the teachers wants them to do.” The ability to push students to higher academic levels is one goal of the school personnel, which also requires effort from the parents. Kate, a teacher, said:

If [the parents] have some kind of awareness of what’s going on, and when the kid has a test and even what a general content they are looking at, so that there is more of a bridge between us so that they can check in once a month or send a note in once a month, or establish with us through email, you can send something home every two weeks just so I know what is going on. And even those little two-sentence communications can make a big difference with a kid, because they feel like, okay, someone’s got their eye on me, someone’s looking out. And it makes a huge difference.

Beth, a teacher, spoke directly of parents reinforcing what is learned during school and taking action when students are not completing what they are asked to do at school:

And know that when I call [a parent], something might happen. That it will have an impact rather than falling on deaf ears because that is frustrating too… I think
that some parents see that school is just the teachers’ job and you should let them
do their job and leave them alone. And while, yes, I appreciate that in part, on the
other hand, what we do in school does go hand in hand with what they do at
home.

However, what makes this part of partnership difficult is that home and school do not always
have the same expectations. Brenna, a teacher with administrative duties expressed this
challenge:

And it is very difficult because to me, I always say, education is the number one,
it is my number one priority, obviously, this is what I do for a living. And so it is
hard for me to understand, how can you not want [to work together]? We are just
trying to help your child. I only have them for six hours a day for 180 days and
that is it. You have them for the rest of your life. And so, I think that some parents
really need to realize that this is not an adversarial relationship, and unfortunately,
sometimes it is created at home and then we get no help here.

The lack of positive relationships and a united front, however, may stem from the fact that rather
than just supporting academics, parents are looking for school staffs that connect with their
individual child as a person. Olivia, a parent, stated this importance:

That was basically it, you know, [school personnel concern and involvement with
[my child]. That we [as parent and school personnel] share that interest. We want
the best for [my child], so in order to have the best for him, we ourselves have to
have a good relationship. And the teacher has to be open to that.
Denise, a parent, talked of their goal being their child’s success, but again spoke of the relationship aspect and love of their child as motivation to be part of a partnership with teachers to share parents’ own expectations.

Even if parents don’t have any degrees or don’t have a job or don’t have immigration status. One thing they all, we all, have in common is our love for our kid and wanting them to succeed in life, rather than seeing them stand and fail. I guess that would be the main point to attract parents… [Parents] would have to make a commitment saying it doesn’t matter where you come from, what makes us all have a common goal is that we want to see success.

Parents and teachers can base their common bond on a cohesive front to support one another in helping the students succeed. This seems to be the aspect not communicated with one another as the base of their relationships. Teachers need to show parents an investment in their respective children, while parents need to show an effort to make education a priority.

In other words, the connections formed must be based on doing what is best for the child. This consistency in focus is common for both parents and school personnel. Brian, an administrator stated,

I don’t think we can make it work without [parents], so I think we have to get parents involved. Um, I mean, I think that at this age, the kids also have to believe, not just think it, but also really believe that we as their teachers and administrators want them to succeed while they are here… We have to make sure that we connect better, and for us as a school, connect better with our families, so that they know we are on the same page with their parents.
Similarly, Olivia, a parent, used the term “consistency” as the force needed for this age group both from home and from school in order to be successful.

There shouldn’t be a vast difference; it should be consistent. Um, whatever you are reinforcing at home, backs up whatever is being taught at school. And so, as soon as you have an inconsistency, you are setting yourself up for failure…um, because then there is going to be a battle between home and school.

This team approach is especially relevant for the middle level of schooling where adolescents are testing boundaries and figuring out who they are as a student and individual. The next theme is derived from the immense number of conversations at meetings and events, and then from interviews about the unique challenge of this age group. Based on these difficulties for both teachers to motivate students academically and for parents to guide their children’s choices, both socially and academically, it is evident that this age group itself is its own major theme.

**Age of Students**

A theme very closely related to the previously discussed connections between home and school is that of the age of students at the middle school level of schooling. Throughout this study, it was clear from all participants and data sources that this particular age group offers some unique challenges. Not only is the age group unsettled as a whole, but the various points of transitions the overall population is experiencing adds additional challenge. Therefore, creating partnerships between home and school could assist both the parents in this difficult stage of parenting and school personnel in educating students. The mutual support becomes key with the additional factors of lack of student motivation, lack of focus on academics, and possible experimentation with risky behaviors. This adolescent period is defined by academic, social, character, and emotional transitions, in which important choices are made and patterns are
developed. While students of this age may attempt to drive adults away from them, it is essential that adults are persistent in their relationships with both the child and also especially in their connections to one another perhaps in spite of the child’s wishes.

Within this theme, there seemed to be two major points that all participants agreed upon: the first is that this is a difficult age group composed of children who tend to drive their parents away from involvement in their lives (including school); the second is that parents are approaching this age group with vastly different viewpoints and methods of parenting.

Keith, a teacher with administrative duties, described middle school students as creating a negative association not only with their individual families, but also more broadly with the school.

I think a lot of parents wish that we were a boarding school and they could give their kids away for three or four years and then take back the humans that used to live with them. I think it is a huge issue. Because every single city, every single state, every single town, every district, I have ever heard of, it’s that parents are okay with the high school and they love the elementary school, but there are bad things going on at that middle school.

Kate, a teacher, related to these sentiments, finding that middle school kids invoke polar associations about school.

People either love or hate middle school. There is no common ground with them because they are so influx. Everything about them is changing. They are changing physically. They are changing mentally. They are constantly testing boundaries. And they are desperately trying to figure out, it’s like they are trying on a different personality every week and seeing if it fits. And that alone puts them at
constant odds with their parents. They are always pushing and pulling and they do
the same with [school personnel], and so I think at the middle school level it is
even harder to get parents involved because all their relationships are strained
under that whole, ‘I don’t know who I am, but I am going to be a giant pain in the
[behind] until I figure it out, and it’s tough.
Just as each child varies, parents also differ in their parenting styles. In an interview, Brian spoke
of various groups of parents based on the level of independence they are attempting to give their
child. In this administrator’s experience with parents at this level of schooling, some are so
worried about their children that they hold onto too much control and do not help their child
learn enough personal responsibility. While others see their middle school student as too mature,
and relinquish too much independence and accountability to a young teenager. The
administrator, Brian, spoke of the challenge in helping parents with their students at this age due
to the various modes families are attempting in their parenting. “So I think there are all these
distinct chunks, and everyone is approaching it from different lenses, approaching middle
school.” Often what many of the school personnel and even parents interviewed observed is that
the difficulty for parents in fighting with their children at this adolescent age often causes them
to give up and give over control. Nathan, a teacher, spoke of parents needing to hold their ground
and realize that it is perfectly normal for every child at this age to push limits and test
boundaries.

[Middle school students] are all so different. There is no formula for each. But
understanding that this is a huge traumatic time in their lives. You know, the
chemical changes and everything like that. And once again, letting parents know,
you know this is what you might expect, it is okay, it’s healthy, and it is not
against you. And don’t fight it. Set boundary lines. Hold to them. And let the kid be a little independent, but know that these are the boundary lines.

For this age group, setting boundaries while allowing kids to be appropriately independent is a fine line to balance.

When parents spoke of this age group, they inadvertently spoke of teaching their children independence and personal responsibility within the same conversation as holding onto control and guiding their children to make appropriate decisions. Grace, a parent, discussed the personal responsibility within the realm of academic grades she hopes for her child.

And then just really putting it back on [the child]. I just feel like they need to take responsibility at this age for what their grades are. And we did have a year when my [child’s] grades were pretty poor and um, I just had to let it go with that. She ended up in summer school and this year she is better. Over the course of time, she understands that her grades reflect the work that she puts into it. So that is my goal, to make [my children] independent.

Later while reflecting on her own involvement with the parent council in order to stay informed of opportunities at the school, Grace also spoke of the need to continue to guide students in making appropriate choices.

They still need guidance, they still need direction, and they need to learn to make choices. Good choices. And again, go back to what I said before; if you are not involved in what is going on in their daily life, it is hard to help them make choices. Or even to know that they are making choices, because the communication isn’t always as it was when they were younger and they told you everything.
Olivia, another parent, related to these fears, especially given the culture kids are living in today.

So it is not because he is becoming an adolescent, well you are now on your own with that one. No! No, it is a more watchful eye now if anything else because of the situation: The age that we live in, the city that we live in. It’s quite different now than when I was a teenager. You know, so I have to protect him from himself.

This confusion even among adults about the proper balance between independence and control makes it impossible to declare a right way to parent, or even for the school to ask for support at home in all the same ways. The role of parents is fluid within the children’s age group as the kids struggle with their own independence; parents have to keep a watchful eye to reign in control as needed.

However, most participants felt that parents could at least remain knowledgeable through getting involved at the school in order to remain a step ahead of their children, to be able to ask the right questions and guide them properly. Knowledge of school expectations and events allows parents to help their children make informed decisions. At this adolescent age when children are not communicating with their parents, proactive involvement at the school may open up lines of communication between parents and children. Grace identified this as the primary reason she gets involved as a parent.

[Involvement] brings, it is a place where you can actually improve your communication too. At middle school and high school, you know so much of their time is spent with their friends and they are trying to pull away from you. And they are trying to separate and be independent and prove their responsibility and trust and all that. But if you don’t have a clue as to what is going on at the school
in terms of what they are supposed to be doing, I think its more unnerving not to
know what is going on because they are doing that pull away thing.
Parents need to stay informed not just so they can guide their students socially and emotionally
through a difficult societal culture today, but, more importantly, so that they can help their
children stay focused academically.

Now more than ever, the middle school years are an essential three years that build study
habits, critical thinking skills and motivation to work through difficult subject areas. With the
current high-stakes testing era, students can no longer graduate from high school without high
levels of achievement in all core subject areas as well as with passing scores on state
standardized tests. Edward, a father, spoke of middle school being the place to set their children
up for success in high school so that they make it to college.

But when middle school comes around, you have to start preparing your son or
daughter for the next step, which is high school, and I think that middle school is
probably the most important of any school level, elementary, middle or high. It’s
middle school where you have to get more involved and get a little more stricter
and, you do the right thing just so they can get by in high school. Because if they
are not ready in high school, it could get worse potentially. That is when kids end
up dropping out or you know, getting into things that they shouldn’t be getting
into. So middle school is actually the one that you need involvement in.

In our society and economy today, people can no longer obtain jobs that can sustain them or a
family unless they have a college degree. In order to help our youth develop the appropriate
study, social and motivational habits of mind, families and school personnel must work together.
However, there are many factors that impede these relationships from forming and from allowing
communication to happen regularly. The next two themes that emerged from the data sources are the parent factors and school factors, which hinder home-school partnerships.

Parent Factors

While the age of students is an important factor in middle school parent involvement, parents have their own barriers and life contexts that often impede further participation at this level of schooling. Completing research in a low-income, urban area, at the middle school level, there are additional socio-economic and cultural factors that all participants referred to in interviews. These same themes were often discussed at parent council meetings and were evident throughout artifacts or informal conversations about increasing parent involvement at the school.

Since the literature in chapter two discussed many of these codes as factors that affect urban parents, I would like to present some of the more unique codes that emerged from the particular data of this study. Just as there is no one formula for each child, there is no one issue that can be addressed to resolve parents’ multiple life histories and personal issues. As the teacher, Nathan put it, “I think every parent is just trying to figure it out. I don’t think that there is a book that tells you what you should do.” As explored earlier, this is a particularly trying time for parents, as their adolescents are changing in a variety of ways and relying on peer rather than parent advice and support. Added to the more commonly researched factors such as parents working multiple jobs, single-parent homes, transportation and child-care issues, language barriers, cultural barriers and a variety of other life contexts, parents in low-income urban settings are often caught in a cycle of poverty and struggle within their neighborhood. Parents themselves may have lived in a similar setting growing up and have been influenced by their own experiences in school.
Many participants spoke of parents’ own negative experiences in schools. This entails their own personal experience of going to school, and also, their experience of their child’s schooling up to this point. Negative feelings or perceptions were spoken of that now prevent parents from getting more involved in their own children’s education. These negative feelings can cause parents to contact or respond to the school inappropriately. When this happens, the school may then feel negatively towards the parents and make overly-zealous responses. Brian, an administrator, spoke of this resentment cycle continuously perpetuated in low-income, urban schools that do not work with parents, but react to them.

I don’t know if this happens in suburban or rural schools, but too often, urban schools are quick to say, get out to a parent. And then what does that do? It creates resentment, a resentment that is felt by the kid and then the cycle just continues.

Parents’ feeling a more indirect discomfort about being in a school setting also perpetuates this resentment cycle. Liz, a teacher, commented on this in her interview.

There are some parents that school was a very difficult experience for them or they have a language barrier, they are intimidated to get involved…And unfortunately [their varied ideas of what their role should be in their children’s education] falls more to, in a lot of my classes, they just don’t get involved. They figure, like, you guys can do it, this is your field, and you take care of it. And I have heard more than once, they are your problem from 7 until 2… School is not that comforting place to them. It is an uncomfortable situation. And I feel like that drives a lot more parents away than disinterest does.
While many of these parents may appear to just not care, their own insecurities or negative memories are actually affecting their choices. Edward, a parent, spoke of the issue of parents seeming indifference affecting their own child and therefore the whole class.

The other thing that happens is that kids come to school who don’t want to learn because their parents don’t care. They distract the other kids who are trying to do their best and it is a very difficult situation for teachers. It always falls back on the parents. It has to. They have to take responsibility for what is going on. It could make such a difference and [parents] don’t even know.

Parents’ negative views of school are directly or inadvertently communicated to their children. Despite relying more on peer opinions, adolescents do internalize their parents’ perspectives and the pessimistic or indifferent viewpoints toward schooling is passed onto the students.

Another cycle spoken of by participants, both directly in interviews and throughout my observations of parent council meetings, is the age of parents. In the experience of this staff, young parents of adolescents do not always make good decisions, and they seem more apt to treat their children as older than they actually are. Brenna, a teacher with administrative duties, spoke of this cycle of young parents unable to model appropriate parenting. Therefore, generation after generation, this cycle continues as young parents have children who also have children young.

And a lot of parents had a child when they were young… They are almost making up for the childhood they missed by now thinking their child is old enough to be home with the younger brother or sister and can take care of them. And yeah, she is old enough to be home for a couple of hours, but not until midnight, not playing the role of the parent. And so I think some of the parents, they had to do the same
things when they were younger and they think that is just what you do. And it is not what you do. And so [the students] are far more mature than their age than they should be because of their own experiences, but emotionally, they are far less mature.

Even if young parents did not grow up with young parents, they may not necessarily be making the best decisions for their children simply because of their own lack of experience. Todd, who works with parents often regarding negative behavior issues as a teacher with administrative duties, spoke of the choices that young parents make.

I think a lot of [these parents] are young parents, so I know that if I had an eighth-grade student at my age, um, I probably wouldn’t be doing all the right things for them. Making bad decisions because of my age… They are not putting their child first. Some of them see their child as interfering with their own lives, which is horrible, but it’s like you get some parents up here and they are just inconvenienced by the whole [parenting] thing.

Without experience and a focus on their children or what it takes to help their children to succeed, parents are then less able to prioritize their children’s education.

A unique finding to this study aside from what the literature emphasizes, even more so than the multiple jobs or language/cultural barriers is that many participants were more concerned with the parents’ decision not to make their children’s education a priority. Liz, a teacher, spoke of this issue.

I feel as though, if they are parenting and making sure they do their work and making school a priority, not necessarily. But some do. If school is a priority to them, it is obviously going to be a priority to their child and vice versa. It is very
hard to see someone, see a parent, and speak with a parent who has told you that school was never a priority to them, to then make it for the child. That is the battle.

Part of this “battle” with parents may be the generational difference in the level of education needed to obtain a job that can sustain someone economically and, even more basically, the number of standards and high-stakes tests required to graduate from high school. Many parents, who like their own parents, have been able to be productive citizens through trade jobs or to succeed in certain careers despite a limited education, do not realize the high stakes that are placed on schools and their students’ grades today in order to make college attainable. Today, high standards of academics are expected at every level of schooling and sustainable jobs are unattainable without a college degree.

Additionally, curricula and the ways in which subjects are taught have drastically changed through the generations. As many parents discussed during school parent council meetings, the “new ways of teaching” look very different and operate at higher levels than when they were in school, which can be intimidating for parents. Beth, a teacher, spoke of understanding parents being overwhelmed by the various subjects and pedagogies now used to teach students.

I think that parents want to help and want to do what they can, but like I said, oftentimes, I think they are not always sure of how to. I mean, I have tried to help kids with the math and the math to me, looks different than when I learned it. So I can’t imagine as a parent, the kid coming home with a geography book, with a novel, with math and science problems and the parent is probably, at this level especially, starting to feel overwhelmed. Because even if they are educated,
intelligent people, it may not be necessarily the way they were taught or the way they understand. So I think that makes things difficult as a parent to try to guide their child in the right direction.

When parents are not involved, they can fall even further behind in understanding what is expected of their child. Through both interviews with parents who are involved and through observations of parent council meetings, the parents who do participate spoke of the knowledge they have gained from one another.

In the literature, this knowledge within the parent groups at the school is called “social capital.” Without having read the official literature, these parents identified this benefit less formally as a result of simply being involved. Parents expressed their gratitude at being able to spend some time at the parent council meetings sharing stories about each other’s children and exchanging advice about working with them, about opportunities available at the school and even about particular teachers or classes. Frequent interactions with other parents and with staff through the parent council allow them to feel comfortable approaching teachers and administrators with both positive feedback and with concerns when they have them. Mary spoke of this as a benefit for parents stemming directly from being on the parent council.

Because [parent involvement] is not just about the parent council. We talk about our kids. We all have kids around the same age and they are all pulling stunts that this one might not have done yet, but this one already did and that is how I solved it. So, that’s important. [The school should] have a coffee hour or just change around the time of day for meetings, you might get more parents.

In turn, when parents that are involved and take the initiative to communicate with teachers and support the school, teachers do respond and even then initiate contacting the parents when they
see something is not right. Edward, another parent, spoke of the positive reaction he has had from teachers since he has taken the initiative to contact them and remain involved.

It’s everyone. Just because [teachers] know the involvement that we have so I can’t point out certain teachers that aren’t doing good. It’s just everybody in general, if there is a problem, then they will let us know, so, we have done that with every single teacher, so its not one particular classroom or cluster or whatever. It’s pretty much, you know, we are going to be notified if something is not right. And they know that they have our full support, so that makes the difference.

This idea of parent factors affecting the school’s reaction segues into the next theme of the school factors that affect home-school partnerships. While parent life contexts and social beliefs/values do prevent more home-school partnerships from occurring, there are an equal number of school factors that preclude this two-way relationship from forming more frequently and effectively.

**School Factors**

Although parents are the primary educators of their children, the school’s personnel understand the education system and the use of curriculum benchmarks. Teachers are the professionals regarding best teaching practices and school organizational structures used to help students remain competitive in schools today. In addition, the amount of educational jargon that prevails in schools makes it intimidating for many parents, especially those from education systems in other countries, to comprehend the current high expectations in schools. Finally, the contrast between the diverse cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds of the parent
population with the predominantly white, middle class teaching force makes building trust and relationships between these parties more challenging.

It became clear over the 15 months working at this site through informal conversations with school personnel that most are unaware that they are often intimidating (professionally and personally) to the parent population. During informal conversations and school parent council meetings (because there were no school personnel present), many parents spoke of how long it takes for them to get comfortable coming to the school, asking questions, and advocating for their child. Administrators and teachers hold the power to determine comfort levels in schools for many families. However, there are no courses or significant preparation time spent in teacher or administrator education programs on this important aspect of the job. While most business operations spend time on developing their employees’ relationship-building with clients, this aspect seems to be lost in the field of education. One possible reason for this may be an assumption that the only clients are the students. But as public servants, teachers must include the parent and community populations as essential stakeholders in building positive school communities that assist in the achievement of students. Not enough time, money or resources are placed into this aspect of schooling. Therefore, there are many school factors that inhibit home-school partnerships from forming more effectively, especially at the middle school level.

Throughout this study, the effect that school factors have on parents’ decisions whether or not to get involved became clear. Both school personnel and parents acknowledge the responsibility that the school should take to recruit and welcome parent participation. Additionally, all stakeholders have clearly determined the lack of a role that the school has allowed for themselves, rather than creating a culture where parent involvement is encouraged, expected and celebrated.
The first and most prominent school factor that arose from all interviews, was noted throughout observations and apparent from the lack of artifacts available to analyze was that the school has no clear system to help parents get involved, or even for teachers to provide consistent communication with families. This factor includes the fact that systematic expectations should not only be explained to teachers, but also enforced through the administration to set the tone that teachers must continuously reach out to families. This would not only create a culture in the school in which students observe and experience all adults working together, but it would also establish that families matter in the educational process.

Often in schools, the administrators set these expectations and the overall culture. One administrator, Kerri admitted, "I mean a lot of teachers make phone calls [when needed]. I don’t think that we do anything else systematically. Its not to say that we shouldn’t, but we don’t."

The lack of systematic forms regarding parent communication and partnering with families became evident in that the majority of participants had differing responses about how communication with families varied throughout the school, whether the difference was by cluster, by grade or by individual teacher. Kate, a teacher, said, “But I think in sixth grade, they are better overall about constant communication. And then after that, I think it just varies by teacher. Unless someone has a great system set up that I don’t know about.” Beth, another teacher, similarly stated:

I think [parent communication] is mostly by cluster. That is what I would go with.

Grade in some respects, because I think generally, parents are much more communicative with the teachers and the teachers are, most of the teachers in the sixth grade are more in the elementary mentality, you know they have a certification in elementary, so they are used to that.
Despite the variation in regular communication with families, the one school role that everyone could agree upon and arose throughout observations and artifacts is that the school is very consistent about reaching out to extreme cases they are working with in the school. Kate, another teacher, stated:

I think oftentimes it falls to the teachers to initiate because it is usually unfortunately; it is usually because a kid is in trouble. Um, on occasion, it is when the kid is doing really well. But those middle-ground kids that always fall by the wayside, they just get lost in the middle… That is just the nature of the beast, you don’t think of [calling parents] because you are doing six million other things when there is not a problem. But when there is a problem, you think, I really need to see this parent. Sometimes there is a kid; I think it is as much an issue when a kid really improves. When a kid makes a big turnaround, I think we all make an effort to really get that message home and get that positive reinforcement there as much as here to keep it going. But again, it is those middle-ground kids that always fall by the wayside, they just get lost in the middle.

Liz agreed and made a similar statement as a teacher:

I do [call home] obviously, if something is happening, I call home and find out.

The extreme cases, you know, if someone is getting straight A’s and then they get C’s, you know something is up, so you make contact with home, but the run of the mill kids, they do what they need to do, they aren’t necessarily pushing themselves. I don’t contact [those parents], and I should.

One active parent on the council, Mary, who was often very frustrated at meetings and events, frequently spoke of parents needing to see the purpose of the parent council as advocating for the
kids in order to garner more positive attention for the kids. She felt that parents should be involved to help make sure that positive communication and events were always happening at the school. Mary often spoke of the lack of regular positive communication as a school-related factor that actually prevented more parents from feeling like they could get involved. “Yeah, it is because [parents] know you are going to hear about it [from the school] when [students] don’t do something right, so let’s hear about it when [students] do do something right.” This consistent negative communication seems to have a two-fold effect on this school community. Parents get used to only hearing about the negative, which is discouraging to many, and then the school does not become a place they want to attend meetings, support events, or even spend time reaching out to teachers.

Liz, a teacher, spoke about parents with children who are failing, yet are also not attending open houses to review report cards or to make a call to find out what is going on. As a teacher I should be giving that parent more to make them more apt to get their child to want to do better. And even work on the child to do better. I do, I do that. But on the parent side, I should say, you know, your child failed first term in more than one subject, you didn’t come to open house. What can we do? But I don’t [make those calls] and I should.

The second of the two-fold effect then becomes that this lack of parent interest creates teacher resentment regarding the obligation to keep attempting communication. Many teachers feel that the events that are offered and the phone calls that are made then need to be reciprocated by parents. This leads to the school personnel giving up on reaching out to parents. Liz, a teacher, also spoke of the written reports at mid-term being her tool to attempt to get parents’ attention.
If a child is not doing well, I send home the warning notice, and I don’t get any contact back from the parent, you know, there is no parent involvement. And then, the first term, you are very conscious of involving the parents, and then when the report card goes home and they didn’t come to open house, they didn’t make a phone call, nothing. It, this is awful to say, but I am less apt to contact that parent, knowing they are not involved should their behavior and grades stay the same.

This lack of determination to involve the families is a factor at this school seems now embedded in the culture.

The teachers seem to consistently reach out to those parents who initiate contact or to parents of children who have a behavioral issue that cannot be controlled by staff alone. One very involved and supportive parent, Olivia, actually confirmed that teachers have a right to be frustrated with those parents who do not initiate contact with the school, just as she is discouraged regarding the amount she has to do on the parent council since there are small numbers of parents involved. When the precedent has been set that parents should not help support teachers, just as they should not support the school through the parent council, the school tends to give up. Olivia stated,

I don’t think the school communicates to parents how they can help them. And again, because I don’t know, maybe at the middle school level where parents seem so distant from everything, the school doesn’t bother anymore, and it’s like that for so long now, so you can’t depend on parents to come and take care of this, so we might as well do it ourselves.
Although the parent indicated this as a legitimate factor, the school’s use of parent indifference as an excuse not to reach out was acknowledged by the administrator, Brian. This was discussed in the context of parent support of homework and studying at home for academic success.

Parents aren’t going to help their kids with algebra homework, because, you know, they can’t do algebra, they don’t want to do algebra, they don’t ever want to go back to algebra. And so, you know, it’s not for schools to say, well parents aren’t helping with the homework. That is really a cop out. It’s an excuse that then a school uses to do nothing.

When schools use parents’ lack of initiative as an excuse, it perpetuates the culture of not partnering with families, and then schools often do not create a welcoming environment and the cycle continues.

Olivia consistently spoke of creating a culture in which parents feel welcome and want to attend events or meetings at the school. She spoke of how focused this school is on getting kids to where they need to be with their achievement, and described how the downside of that focus is that that school staff does not take the time to plan events that involve families or even communicate when positive things are taking place at the school. In particular, at one council meeting, parents were very frustrated with not knowing that a fundraiser to raise money for the selected 25 eighth-grade students to attend President Obama’s inauguration in January of 2009 had already passed. Many of the parents spoke that night about how much more support these students could have had if parents had known to send in money with their children for the raffle ticket fundraiser. Olivia went on to speak more generally.

Events. Sometimes [parents] don’t know about events until like the day before. Or the same day, and you are like, what? Or it is past and it is like, when did that
happen? I didn’t know. Um, and I don’t know if it is possible where the school itself, from the administration down, is so focused on getting the kids to do what they need to do and it’s their focus on kids.

This focus on kids and lack of concentration on partnering with families seems to be the major factor that prevents school personnel from proactive investment to garner parent support.

Because they are entrusted with the “big picture” view of all stakeholders of the school, administrators often see this perspective of the lack of reaching out to parents and then how families receive efforts. Two administrators, Dana and Kerri, clearly admitted that at this level of schooling, there is a lack of encouragement for parents to stay involved, let alone to increase their involvement due to the high stakes of social choices and academic demands placed on students as they approach high school. Dana said, “I don’t think that [parents] have been asked a whole lot either, to participate. And so, therefore, I don’t think they would perceive that they would know that they could get involved more.” Kerri, who plays a key role in the sixth-grade orientation at this school, spoke of how parent involvement and participation is mentioned at parents’ first encounter in the school, but then not followed through with consistently.

I think many [parents] hear us say that we encourage their participation, but they don’t believe it. Perhaps it is because we don’t say it frequently. We may say it in a formal setting at the start of the year, but we may not continue it on a regular basis. We don’t have a newsletter that goes home every week or even every month that continues to encourage them to get involved. We don’t send those, do those [all school call] phone calls unless there is some big something going on. And that could be another opportunity to say we want your involvement and we encourage you to get involved. And I think parents won’t believe it until they hear
it a lot. And not just an invitation from a few other parents, but from the principal and the vice principal and the rest of us.

Parents must hear often that they are needed and wanted within their child’s education. Frequent messages also requires the school staff being more open to parents and then taking the time to find ways for them to participate in more positive traditions.

Brenna, a teacher with administrative duties, recognized the amount of time teachers put into their students during the day, but the lack of priority to work with parents.

Ideally we would be more open to parents. We sit there and say we are here. No we are not. Two o’clock comes and this place is a ghost town. People have other things. People take courses, have other jobs and have families. I know for me, I have to be out of the building by 2:25pm or my daughter is going to be waiting at her school by herself. So there are certain things that we say, yeah, yeah, yeah, but in reality, no.

In addition to educators’ other obligations, being such a large public school that has students from multiple neighborhoods, schools may feel the task of public support as daunting. In turn, this large school allows anonymity for the teachers and staff, which make the school feel less open to parents. Grace, who is a highly involved parent in all school events and with all of her children’s teachers, still spoke of the intimidating factor of a large public school.

Before [my children] were here in public schooling, I had them in private school and it was, it felt more accessible. You could walk into the school, um, to the principal’s office or to the main office and, afterschool, you would see teachers and you would be able to converse with them and talk with them. In Roslyn Public Schools, I don’t find that it’s as easy to do that. And it is probably because
there are a lot more kids, there is a lot more structure, there is a lot more going on.

It’s a bit intimidating to call a teacher, to pull them out of a classroom or to ask them to call you back or to set up an appointment. Although I have done it and it seems to be fine, it still feels sort of intimidating.

Part of this intimidation factor is due to the lack of positive events that parents are called to the school to attend. Other than an orientation at the start of sixth grade, three open houses a year at night, a holiday concert and a multicultural show held during the school day each year, there are no other events that are advertised to parents to have them get to know staff and one another. As a school that draws from multiple neighborhoods, even parents do not have relationships with other parents. Therefore, without knowing anyone, joining a parent organization can seem daunting.

Brenna, a teacher with administrative duties, spoke of the lack of events with positive associations, particularly ones that center around the incredible academic work being done at this school.

But even if we surveyed the parents and said when would this work for you. We don’t have like shows or anything that parents want. You know, we don’t have an art fair, we don’t have a science fair, and we don’t have a social studies debate. You know where we can say come on in and see what your child is doing. And there will be nothing, no strings attached, we are not going to say, your child is bad. But let’s face it, who wants to come in and hear that [their child] is doing bad. Instead of hey, look at how well he did on this picture or whatever.

Similarly, the parent, Edward, spoke of holding events that do not have negative associations for parents, such as conferences or behavior meetings.
Some nice activities would be nice just to get some more people involved. Maybe something that is more attractive to get people to come out. Even though we are talking about your son or daughter and that should be enough, but some of these people don’t think that way, so. I think some activities that would lead them here and get them more involved to see what the school is trying to do and all that. I think that is very helpful.

Taking the time to build relationships with families and to allow parents the opportunity to understand the incredibly important and focused work this school is doing to prepare students is an essential time investment on the part of the school personnel.

But participants mentioned time constraints consistently, not only for staff, but also for parents. Nathan, a teacher, described the lack of time to reach out to parents as the investment that, if made appropriately and systematically across the school, could be the key to the school taking its work with student achievement to the next level.

I think [the school personnel] all get caught up in the daily grind of being in the school. And, kind of parents, just kind of take a back seat. The whole parent collaboration just takes a back seat because we have much bigger issues to work on, even though it is a big issue. I actually think [parent collaboration] would solve a lot of other issues we are working on.

In further speaking with this teacher, he expressed that student focus on education and improving student social / behavior choices are needed before the school can continue to raise achievement. Through home-school partnerships, some of these issues could be resolved for a majority of students at the school. Additionally, teachers could remove their focus from all the extreme cases
and really work on pushing all students. However, given that time is a factor for everyone, this feat is noticeably easier described than actually achieved.

*Time as Factor for Everyone Involved*

Equally as important as the factors that both parents and school personnel hold separately from making home-school partnerships more prevalent and productive, is one common denominator: time. All participants directly spoke of, every observation included, all artifacts alluded to and every informal conversation mentioned time constraints with regard to all school community stakeholders. In my two years spent at this school, there is not one person on staff or one caretaker that I met who was not overloaded with work, personal and family commitments. The fast-paced society we have created here in the U.S. (and especially on the east coast) alongside the high cost of living, makes working more than one job common and the luxury of spare time virtually non-existent for most teachers and parents. Simultaneously, the job of administrators today is essentially impossible to complete within a given school day, making for extra hours at night and/or in the morning, as well as on weekends. The completion of what has to be done often takes precedence over what people would ideally like to do for one another in schools. This includes holding more positive events, making more phone calls that are not “necessary” and spending more time getting to know one another.

Unlike the other themes, this theme emerged not from an abundance of first-order codes, but from just two prevailing codes that existed in all conversations and observations, as well as from an underlying issue in artifacts: time as a factor for everyone; and the need for a parent liaison to keep a positive focus on parent involvement. While this first code emerged as a preventative factor for all stakeholders to get more involved with one another, the second code emerged as a solution, and therefore an implication for practice.
The first aspect, time as a factor, was related by participants to several areas: time as a factor for each adult stakeholder involved at the school; middle school teachers’ large caseload of students; the way society is and therefore the number and long hours of jobs held; and the school hours that affect the times at which parents and teachers can communicate. Kerri, an administrator, spoke of her own situation that clearly described what most participants spoke of in a less direct way.

My beliefs are one thing and what I do, what I am able to do, is quite another. Because I would love to see parents in and out often. Um, but when it comes to reaching out to them, um, that is another. I’d like to do a weekly something to parents, and I don’t know if I would ever have the time to do that, and email certainly would be great. Because then I know it would be going directly to the parent and not getting lost in the backpack. Um, I would love to do an all-call phone thing to have them come for some sort of a speaker or seminar. I just haven’t done it. Um, so there is a lot I would like to do and just haven’t done it.

Either because I haven’t had the time or I haven’t had the resources.

For staff, it seems that the number of students on their caseload overwhelms them. Through both interviews and informal conversations, many staff expressed that the nature of phone calls without a systematic approach, expectations set or training on how to approach parents can be daunting. Through conversations at parent council meetings and interviews, parents described being overloaded with multiple jobs, jobs at odd hours, jobs with long shifts and balancing work with spending time at home.

Without a systematic approach to communicating with parents of students at the middle school level, teachers are overloaded with the number of students they see per day and the
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number of calls that would require. Dana, an administrator spoke of this factor as it might affect teachers.

I would like to see teachers reach out to parents more than sometimes they do. I know that is hard, because even in this school for instance, the average teacher may service 150 kids a day, and so that is really hard to write a 150 notes or make a 150 emails or a 150 phone calls. That is not realistic, but it is always good for parents to every once in a blue moon, to get a good news call. Or a good news email, if they email, or even if the teacher took two seconds to grab a child’s assignment notebook and write two sentences in there.

Without having assigned staff to particular families and spreading the responsibility for contact, the task of communicating regularly with parents is overwhelming. Unlike elementary school, where teachers see the same set of students for most of their day, these teachers have multiple classes, not to mention their own homeroom. Additionally, without knowing which ways teachers prefer to communicate (for example by phone, email or notes home), parents may not be looking out for the communication and therefore not responding. Brenna spoke of parents from elementary schools expecting the teacher to initiate the contact, even with the difference in middle school caseloads. “I say to parents all the time, some of these teachers teach 100 plus students. You have how many kids in your life? So it is unrealistic for the parents to think that it is the teachers’ job to go to them.”

In addition to the number of students that teachers are responsible for, the “job hours” are different than most careers and especially so at this middle school, which runs from 7:20am until 1:30pm daily. This schedule is not exactly conducive to most parents’ schedules, and does not allow them to easily communicate and/or to attend the school for events and meetings during the
school day. Brian, an administrator, recognized this inconvenient time for parents and teachers to meet or communicate. “…The hours of our school are not conducive to [communicating]. You know, 7:00am until 1:45pm [teachers are here], that doesn’t really work for most [parents].”

Beth, a teacher, acknowledged that the staff tends to go home to their own families at the end of the day, but most parents of students at the school do not have those same hours. “I think time is one [factor]. So many parents work different schedules, you know, we are fortunate that we get out when we do so when we have our own families, we will be home for that time of the day, but not all parents have that luxury.” Todd, a teacher with administrative duties, spoke about needing to make phone calls at night, but not putting the time into this communication once he is home.

Communication is difficult during the day. You know, and should I bring a list of phone numbers home and make calls, maybe. Because by the time you think of calling a parent, if you don’t write it down that you need to call them, you are already dealing with five other things and if you remember four days later, it’s already gone and you missed your opportunity.

While teachers are overburdened with caseloads and their hours of work are not conducive to communicating with families, many parents of students at this school have scheduling difficulties involving their jobs, their number of kids at home and each child’s obligations, and transportation.

Dana, an administrator, aligned all these factors to our society and the way in which it is set up. “And time is the biggest enemy. Because of the way that society is set up, time is the biggest factor. It is physically getting the time to physically come up to the school. I would like to see more.” Brian, another administrator, specifically discussed the climate of the economy and people’s fears regarding job security.
I think the other huge factor is the parents’ ability time-wise. I think what we are seeing right now is a lot of parents who are afraid to ask their boss to come in an hour late, you know, to leave an hour early to come to the school. They are afraid that if they do that one time too many, the next round of job cuts, their name will be on the list.

Denise, a parent who is involved personally with teachers, but cannot do more expressed that work and keeping her own family economically secure is her priority. “I can’t really make it to the activities, but I do, my main point is to make it to the meetings with the teachers and stuff like that, but other things, I can’t get involved in.” This parent, like many others, has two younger children at home, works during the day, and goes to school at night. Dana, an administrator, spoke of parents with younger children at home being unable to attend more events at night. “And how many kids are at home. Because if you have three or four or five little ones at home, you are probably not going to make it up here [to the school].”

Another factor with time is travel time. The Roslyn Public Schools do not have neighborhood schools, but instead, have multiple zones across the city within which students are bused. For parents, public transportation may be their only option and based on where they live may not be conveniently located for them. Dana spoke of this factor.

Some parents don’t have cars. And not that you need to have a car to get here, but with time being what it is, for a parent to come from [the south part of this zone] and have to take two buses, and maybe a trolley or something, and then the extra time it takes for the bus to meet up with the next bus. That [travel time] multiplied by multiple children…
Both school staff and parents are overloaded with work schedules, family obligations and activities. Our society today is characterized by rushing and overly-booked schedules. Making the time for communication and events that could lead to relationship-building and trust between all adults for the sake of students’ interests often falls by the wayside. Throughout this study, each participant and each data source revealed that in order to combat this time factor, having a particular point person whose sole job is to lead parent and community outreach may not only eliminate some of the burden of planning for teachers and parents, but might also keep the focus on the importance of home-school partnerships.

The need for a parent liaison first emerged from discussions with school personnel regarding my own role as parent council coordinator. Liz, a teacher, spoke about the existence of my role as an administrative intern as encouraging her to reach out to parents and my ability to take over the responsibility of planning events.

But when you [researcher] were here, that was like kind of what you did, so it was our biggest turn out. So I feel like if there was someone at the school making that effort to contact those parents, you would be surprised at what it does.

While in my role as researcher, the topic of this discussion about the benefit stakeholders experienced with someone whose job it could be to focus on parent involvement continued. Dana, an administrator, spoke of this role of keeping everyone focused on parent engagement as an important aspect of the school community. “If we had the money, it would be nice to have a paid parent coordinator of some sort. To make those phone calls, to drag the parents out, to remind them of stuff, to have more activities in this school.”

Since time is such a pertinent factor, many participants felt that having someone in a role to assist in creating home school partnerships might lead to more effective and consistent forms
of school personnel reaching out, which could result in more parent participation. Nathan, a teacher, spoke of how administrators need to stay focused on curriculum and academics, which is why having a point person for families would be key to keeping them informed and keeping the staff focused on communication and outreach.

So really, having a point person in the school to organize that stuff and keep it a focus and bring it to our principal and say we need to be doing this kind of stuff, we need to do that, we need to this, is essential. Community outreach person/parent coordinator would be a very valuable position to have at the school.

In my two school years leading the parent council and one year as principal intern, I was able to accomplish tangible goals around increasing parent participation. Equally as important, my persistence in asking questions and listening to beliefs, factors and goals was a constant reminder to staff and parents that these partnerships are important. The difference in depth of conversations and number of ideas around parent participation at the school increased over the course of the two years I was there as an intern, parent council facilitator and researcher.

**Parent Roles**

Although my hope at the outset of this study was to find commonalities in defining an appropriate parent role at the middle school level in a low-income, urban and diverse cultural setting, this theme of appropriate parent roles arose throughout every interview, was discussed at every event or meeting, and was an underlying context in all documents used for artifact analysis. Even when not directly asked, stakeholders spoke of what they wished parents would do at this level of schooling to help their children achieve academically despite the hardships many families in this community face. In spite of the various beliefs, backgrounds, values, perceptions, experiences and perspectives that the multiple stakeholders involved in this study
personally hold, the appropriate roles theme not only resonated in all conversations, but more importantly, revealed that commonalities do in fact exist. While actually defining an appropriate parent role occurs in chapter five, here I aspire to allow the data to speak for itself.

This theme of parent roles usually followed or prefaced statements made regarding parent factors, or reasons that parents were prevented from more effectively or appropriately being involved. Participants spoke either in the ideal or using examples of families who do participate appropriately (which is a small number of families at this school). All participants felt that in spite of hardships that many families at this school face, and although students at this age are beginning to crave independence, there are some very clear roles that parents must take to help the school raise student achievement. One of the most important aspects of this role is that parents do recognize their own fluid and flexible responsibility to balance independence and control, advocacy and questioning when it comes to their children. All stakeholders acknowledged that this is not an easy task. Keith, a teacher with administrative duties, spoke of this flexibility.

It is almost like, it is a difficult role, and it is not one that you can set automatic.

You know, certain barriers or roles or parameters that a parent is always going to follow. It is always going to be a flexible, fluid thing where something is going to change. Sometimes a parent needs to protect their child. Sometimes a parent needs to realize that their child is in the wrong. I mean it is just being open-minded enough to know that it can go both ways.

One parent, Grace, who is very involved and active with her child’s education, spoke of remaining active in questioning what was going on in her child’s life and remaining able to communicate about school. She spoke often of her child relying more on peers and not opening
up to her as she did in elementary school. However, even in spite of this acknowledgement that her daughter still needs her to be actively involved and to keep some guidance and control over decisions, this mom recognized the need to allow her daughter to learn to be independent.

I think, in my relationship with her, has changed. Where before, I was giving her a lot of direction and you know, propping her up and making sure things were all the way they were supposed to be. Now, in middle school, I let her take responsibility for homework and making sure the bag is ready and making sure she’s got her folders. I have run up with one or two lunches that she has forgotten, but aside from that, um, just sort of taking a step back and letting her take on responsibility. I think that is important at this age. But still being able to have some sense of guidance and control over her world around her.

In some ways, this flexibility is even more difficult when parents need to separate their own personal experiences in school from that of their child.

Despite parents’ own experiences in school or feelings about school, participants agreed that it is important for parents to let go of negative attitudes and to be able move forward to get involved for the sake of their children. Todd, a teacher with administrative duties, noted that parents have the power to make school a more positive experience for their children.

Concern for their child. Um, wanting their child to do well. Wanting their child to succeed. Um, wanting something for their child that is better than them when they grew up. Um, seeing education as a way out. As an answer to a, to a place, seeing it as the answer to getting your child where you want them to be. And not leaving it up to the child to make those decisions at such an early age.
This focus on their children’s abilities to utilize education as an empowering tool is the key to helping their children raise achievement levels and be successful even beyond school. One administrator, Dana, notes that when parents get involved, teachers tend to pay more attention to those children. “I think that the more [parents] participate, the more that [parents] communicate, the more attention that their child gets from staff and from teachers.” Teachers tend to communicate and provide more attention to students whom they know get supported at home. In this way, teachers also may feel supported in their own difficult daily work. Neither parents nor teachers can help a child succeed in the education process without one another.

Edward spoke of the essential nature of the attitudes and focus of parents at home and the affect these outlooks may have on the classroom. This parent said,

I don’t think there is a bad school in the world, I really don’t. I think it is more, that there is no parents involved. Because obviously, teachers come in to do a job, and their job is to teach, but ah, if they don’t have, even the city of Roslyn or the parents’ support, then it doesn’t matter what school you go to, you aren’t going to learn anything because there needs to be a family involved with that particular child to make it happen. It? That is not complete, it is just not going to happen.

Participants agree that in order for children to view education as a priority, the focus must begin at home.

Although many families in low-income, urban settings face various barriers and may struggle to directly support students with their homework, parents can still provide the expectations and guidance at home needed to focus children. One teacher, Kate, spoke of the structure that parents can provide to get homework completed.
I think the biggest part is just some kind of supervision at home. Even if it is just checking in, ‘Did you do your homework?’ or “Do you have a test tomorrow?” Just a general awareness of what they are doing in school. Um, which I think is much too often lacking with our kids. That alone would be a huge step for our kids.

Another basic parenting piece that participants spoke of is too often parent give into their children and relinquish their authority as parents. Kerri spoke on this topic in light of all the conversations she has had with struggling families in her administrative role.

For the broader [parent] community, ignoring their kids when the kids say, ‘No, don’t call.’ ‘No don’t come [to meetings]. ‘Stay out of my life.’ To say that [parents] are still going to be involved. And that is very hard for parents to do [at this stage of their child’s life]. Very, very hard.

With students of this age, who are constantly testing boundaries and pushing limits, parents find it easier to give in to that fight. Brenna, a teacher with administrative duties, stated that she saw this often with students who struggle with behavior issues.

And I really believe that [parents] have this misconception that they are not the boss. You know, parents are the bosses. And they have a lot more power than they are willing to use and they give it up too easily. Because it is hard. You have to fight with your child. But it is called being a parent. And I think that their role, could be, a lot more involved.

When parents embrace their role and act as the parent with all the difficult decisions and conversations that accompany parenthood, they tend to remain informed of school happenings
and become more confident in taking the initiative with both their own children and at the school.

This initiative piece of the parent role is key in helping teachers to feel supported. When teachers perceive this partnership with families, they tend to initiate and respond with feedback more frequently. Many school staff members spoke of parents taking the first step as all that they need to continue to communicate and build relationships with families. With large caseloads of students at the middle school level, teachers tend not to want to use time to contact families who will not return their call or are not productive advocates and supporters of their children’s education. One teacher, Beth, spoke of this issue.

I think at the beginning, the parent has to make that first step. If it is coming to the open house, if it is coming up, you know, if they are unable to make it, trying to make some other kind of contact and saying, ‘I am so and so’s parents, I want to be involved, please call me when there is something going on.’ And just knowing that the parent is available, or even if they come in and get a message through the secretary saying I just want to check in, then that way you know the parent is open too.

During both interviews and meetings, parents spoke of the importance of knowing what is going on at the school, and they all noted that initiating contact with teachers, attending the first open house, letting teachers know that they want to be involved, and making themselves available through numerous forms of contact, has made a difference in their communication and work with teachers to support their child. Grace, a parent, spoke of the first open house and follow-through with the other report card nights in this way.
I think definitely in showing up at open houses. Meeting teachers for the first time, introducing yourself by name and who your child is. You know, being up front and sort of, call me if there are any problems. These are the concerns I have with my child. I did that the first year I was here and it really paid off because she ended up getting more of what she needed. And um, so I would recommend that for parents.

Denise, who struggles to attend events at the school, but is very personally active with her child’s teachers through the phone and email spoke of making the time for that first contact to open up the lines of communication.

Every time, when I start the year, I go to the first parent conference. And at that night, I always give my business card and at that point I go up, I introduce myself. And I single him out and say, ‘that is my kid.” This is my card, I give them my cell, home and work number and I tell them if you need me or have a reason I should be here, I will be here. So that is the way I initiate [communication].

Once this rapport is established, students see the connection between home and school, which allows students to see adults communicating about them and to understand that schooling does not end when they leave the building. Making this connection from home to school is key for this age group. (In the next theme, I will also discuss the connection that the school needs to make back to home.) All participants referred to the idea of parents communicating and emphasizing school at home as an essential part of the equation. Nathan, a teacher, spoke of this concept passionately.

They just have to be involved. You know, it’s, they have to get involved in their child’s education. The child has to know that school does not end when they leave
the building. That they are going to be checked when they get home. You know, that the work means something when they get home. As opposed to just going home, being alone for five hours, eating dinner and going to sleep. They have to know that what they do here has relevance to their whole world. And they definitely don’t feel that now.

Throughout this study, participants recognized that the parents are the consistent and continuous factor in their children’s education. Parents have to help make a connection to school for their children’s sake. Grace spoke of this same idea in terms of being able to individualize the curriculum for her child. While in the classroom, the instruction and pedagogy are consistent for every child; when this parent creates a partnership with her child’s teachers, she is then able to make the curriculum more suitable for her individual child.

And try to promote best practice with each kid and so, as a parent, I think it is important to understand what [the parent] role is and how [students] are impacted. And create an alliance with [teachers] about your particular child and what your goals and what [the teachers] goals are and try to work on them.

Another parent, Edward, spoke of the empowerment teachers might feel just by simply knowing they are supported by the home. Although Edward does not attend many meetings or events, he is highly involved with his daughter. He spoke often of how great her education has been even compared to peers who are in the same room, but not receiving the same benefits. He attributed this to his and his wife’s involvement.

I think it is important, ah, for a teacher to know that she can count on a parent. I think it helps a lot in their classroom and to keep more control of the students and to get them on the right level, as far as learning. When there is no back up, the
teacher can only do so much. So, my role is to be there for the teacher, and let her understand that we are involved and anything she needs, we are going to be involved, so that has been my role as a parent.

This work and support that parents can bring to the classroom is the groundwork for individual student success and focus on academics. This role of parents can also be expanded to have a greater effect on the whole school community.

The important individual academic work parents do for their children is continued by parents who join the parent council or the school council in order to advocate for the student population and perhaps even for the whole school community at times. Mary, a parent, spoke of the work of the parent council to promote a more positive culture in the school. Her frustration stems from only working with a very small group on the parent council. This group then bears the burden of fundraising, events and representing the parent voice at meetings, and is limited in what can be accomplished each year. After attending an honor roll ceremony mid-day with more than 100 other parents, Mary’s frustration stemmed from the fact that more celebrations and positive events could be held if more parents took the time to get involved. “And I mean, it’s not like, if [parents] can all get off for that [honor roll ceremony] with a day’s notice. Get off work or whatever they are doing. This [parent council] is just as important. Let’s make sure your kid is always highlighted.” Another parent, John, spoke not only of what can be accomplished, but also of the amount of information that parents are not receiving and are therefore unable to advocate for their children’s education in more powerful ways. John, a single dad often talked about how much more comfortable and informed he felt at this school having served on both the parent council and the school site council. He believes in the empowering nature of education for his child and believes that if more parents were involved, the school system could be improved.
Come to the parent council meetings. Voice [parents’] opinions. Talking with the principal. Coming up with a lot of suggestions on how we can, you know, really educate our kids and keep them grounded in the school system. You know, just reaching out to the school more, because that is the major part of it.

The parent role must start at home, but it must also transfer to a presence and support at the school. In order for this to happen, the school needs to make a concerted effort to let parents know that they are welcome and that they matter in their children’s education.

**School Roles**

As often as participants brought up roles that parents could and should be taking on at this level of schooling in this economically challenged, urban setting, all stakeholders were complementing these statements with what the school could and should be doing to encourage parents to do so. Through interviews, observations and artifacts, the data revealed that a precedent had been set at this school for teachers not to reach out to families consistently. The reasoning behind this lack of parent contact culture is less clearly defined. The debate remains around the cause: Have teachers’ demanding schedules and lack of emphasis on parent contact caused a lack of expectation? Or, have parents’ lack of response to communication caused teachers to give up on trying? As both an intern and researcher in this setting, it seems like a combination of factors has led to the attitude and beliefs that home-school partnerships are no longer a priority. This may be due to the number of other demands on school administrators, teachers and parents today alongside a common lack of initiative by parents.

In spite of expectations by the staff, all participants, including staff themselves, spoke frequently about what they could and should be doing to promote parent involvement. Some staff even spoke directly of the daily behavior and extreme cases that dominate their time. They also
felt that these particular circumstances, which consume their attention, might be lessened if parents and staff took the time to communicate and work together. This theme has implications for action steps the school could be taking to help establish a culture of nurturing and supporting parents in helping their children to succeed academically and socially at this very difficult, yet critical, turning point in their lives. (Further implications for practice are discussed in chapter five).

Overall, there was common admission among school personnel of a lack of persistence in involving families. Too often, school personnel are quick to give up on parents who do not get back to them or do not attend the first open house. An administrator, Kerri, spoke of the need to have a positive outlook on parents.

I think that you have to go on the assumption that there is not a parent out there that doesn’t want their kid to do better than they are doing to succeed. It is just a matter of someone’s struggling or a kid is struggling, making sure that we have different tools to reach out. Different ways to reach out to help people figure it out, because there are plenty of kids where you just don’t know what to do. You try something and then you try something else and then something else, and you know, you have to be persistent and your have to be tenacious.

Having worked with the school personnel for two years, this is indeed a staff that does not give up on students. However, a major shift in culture of the school should focus on not giving up on parent partnership, in the same way.

The persistence that is necessary is a flexible, non-judgmental culture in which teachers understand that parents’ lives may be very different from their own. Keith, who has a lot of
contact with struggling families in his role as a teacher with administrative duties, spoke of this necessary flexible nature of teachers.

I don’t think we have a whole lot of nine to five parents if you go percentage-wise. We have some, but, you know, you need to be flexible, to allow the parents, to give them a shot to participate, to help out, just to be involved. And every time we get a parent up, we get a little better effort out of the kids.

One administrator referenced the cluster leader, Brenna’s ability to create a culture around partnering with families in one cluster. Kerri desires the whole school to create a culture where there is no excuse not to reach out to parents.

But I know that it is the…not the nature of…it is the culture of that cluster and all of the teachers seem to have bought into it there and so, the other teachers would have to have the same kind of buy in, and put the same kind of effort in.

Kerri is alluding to the fact that Brenna’s leadership supports her teachers, pushes them to make calls, makes calls herself and tracks down the correct contact information when needed. This role of persisting to form natural partnerships with families begins with the administration sending the message that parent involvement actually makes a difference. Olivia, a parent, spoke of the administration’s attitude toward parents influencing her decision to get involved.

If the administration is enthusiastic, inviting, presents a culture of cooperation, then I definitely want to get involved. Um, because then you know that your small part is making a difference. As opposed to working in an environment where there isn’t that, that kind of support. You just don’t feel that whatever you can contribute is going to make a difference. So definitely, I think that the administration plays a big role in it.
Another parent, Denise, spoke of these partnerships not just coming from the top or the administration, but rather from within the whole school community in order to best take advantage of all the resources already available.

Engaging the [school] community, at least the ones that are in the school, maybe getting others involved that are involved in other [schools]. Making this happen, ‘what can we do to make the schools better?’ We have the resources right now, even if there is a financial crisis, we still have the resources that aren’t available in any other country, let’s make a better use of what we have. And we can. We have the building, we have the capacity, we have the staff, and we have the people.

The role of the school is to focus on the human capital of the school community to make parents feel part of their children’s education.

To create this, the school must be willing to put in the work to build relationships and add the personal touch to communication. Liz, a teacher, used the example of being asked to make personal phone calls before the first open house to ensure that parents knew when it was and that their presence was desired and needed.

I think [personal phone calls] encourages [parents], I think that the year you [researcher] were here and the year we were kind of…not told, but suggested to make phone calls home telling [parents about open house], I think that was our biggest turnout because they heard it from a voice on the phone, not just automated, not just written, um, so any, um, personal touch, I think will get them here. Or they will at least, not feel guilty, but at least think to contact you sometime later on.
The teacher, Nathan agreed with the benefit of the personal touch. Nathan feels there is a need for more personal phone calls, more positive programming which includes parents, more relationship building opportunities and the creation of loyalty and pride among families at the school.

And I think that is really, really what you need to do. You need to have events and have things where you spend time with the parents. Because just having a phone call is very impersonal. Having an open house, you’re in, you’re out, you talk to the teachers, and you are out. So, you really need programming that makes the parents feel a part of the school.

This idea of positive events that were not related to report cards, but rather highlighted student talents and the myriad activities in which students are engaged throughout the school day arose in every interview with school personnel and was discussed often by parents at the parent council.

Brian, an administrator, spoke of the importance of utilizing more events that showcase student talent in order to change the parents’ perspective of the school. Currently, the school could be perceived as only being about academics, when really this school is focused on the education of each individual student as a whole person.

[Positive events] can be part of an open house, but just to showcase kids’ talents. Um, and there does need to be more of that, and not just come talk about report cards. I mean, that is critical, but make it positive. And we have parents come up for, in this two-hour window, to talk about report card, and 15 parents show up, how does everyone get the time they need for the report card. Sometimes it really
works well and sometimes it doesn’t. We are a whole lot more than just report cards. We are about kids and kids are doing some exciting stuff.

One teacher, Beth spoke of this idea in the context of the one annual show that takes place during the school day, the multicultural show. During this event, parents whom teachers have never seen or met, arrive to see their children perform. Beth was responding to my own question of how you turn report card events into positive performances by students themselves.

Because if you look at the multicultural show, if you look at that, parents come to that, because their kid is up on stage and they are performing. So, you know, they do want to get involved or they can get involved, it’s just a matter of finding a way to get them here… I guess they would [attend] academically [oriented events]. Yeah, of course they would because if their kid were presenting, they would come. Not every kid, I mean not every parent would come, but if it was some sort of like open panel, like a science fair or something, those parents, if their kids were here, would want to be here.

Bringing parents into academic settings in more meaningful ways begins the process of truly involving parents in the academic process.

Kate, a teacher, admitted the school’s deficiency of involving parents in focused goal-setting and in raising student academic achievement in the same ways school personnel engages students.

I think it has been helpful this year, we have tried giving out warning notices and report cards, not just sending them home or just handing them out quickly. But really taking a break in the day and having the principal and vice principal hand them out personally. And I think that is great because the kids realize how
important it is, but then there is also a little piece missing there with the parents because some of the kids still go home and still don’t show it. And I think we started off on the right path, but there needs to be something more, something else, and I am not really sure what it is, but something added. Something added to that to pull the parents in too.

Participants agreed that if schools continue to focus on negative behavior issues with families, rather than on the real academic work achieved in the classroom, the negative feelings toward education and schools as institutions will continue to perpetuate in these low-income, urban settings where these feelings already thrive. Participants felt that school personnel have an important role in building relationships with families based on their genuine interest in their children’s success, and ensuring communication between home and school on individual children’s needs at this age level. Olivia, a parent, spoke of the accessibility of the school as the most obvious and essential characteristic in encouraging parents to participate.

Again, basically, that open-door policy. If that is there, then things can work. When, as a parent, you feel that you are closed off, then you don’t have much of a say, or if you think that the teacher, and again, the teachers, if with my son’s teachers, I find that they are motivated, they are enthusiastic, and, you know, that gets me excited, because then I can get him, you know excited.

Unfortunately, many parents do not feel that large, public middle schools feel open and accessible. Therefore, parents feel intimidated to get involved or build relationships with other families. This accessibility is one key feature for the school to create. Along with discussing the overall openness of the school, Olivia spoke of needing to feel that school personnel genuinely know and care for her individual child.
I need to know that the teacher cares. And I’ve invested a lot into my kids and I expect a lot from them and so I look for the whole package [in a school]. What is going to be most beneficial? And again, it might be selfish on my part, but I need to look to find out, what is the most beneficial that my kids are going to get out of this school. They have to get something out of it. And it has to be in the best interest of the children.

Participants agree that what works best for students at this age level are adults communicating with one another to provide a unified team. Todd, a teacher with administrative duties, spoke of wanting to give more advice to families regarding this difficult age group. But without a strong, previously established relationship, he did not feel it was his place. In building bonds and consistent communication, he might be able to take on that role and provide further support to families who are at a loss about the social characteristics of adolescents and tend to pull away as a result.

But we see, as teachers, and in middle school, we see that same age, year after year after year, after year, whereas these parents, who have to go through it for that first time, they just kind of don’t know what hits them, whether it be hormones of just those adolescent years and don’t know how to handle it.

Parents can only learn of the access to the school and resources, and care their child is receiving from school personnel if there is consistent school communication. Mary, a parent, spoke of how important regular contact with teachers is to keep parents engaged in the school, speaking with their children about school and supporting the work of the teachers.

[The school] needs to [communicate regularly]. They need to do it. Parents don’t know [what is going on up here]. And even the phone, [the principal] is not using
the phone at all. If I ever got a call, I would trip over everything trying to get it if it came from the Revere. We get them from the elementary school three times a week and I listen to them. You never know what is going on up here unless you (researcher) tell me or we find out at parent council and that is like five people. There are five hundred kids in this school. I don’t know anything that is going on up here. It has to be done. It has to be done now more than ever.

This parent was speaking of the frustration that the parent council brought to the principal in January of 2009 to address the overall communication gap they felt. All the parents on the council agreed that there were very positive things happening at the school and they were extremely satisfied with their children’s education and happiness. But, they felt that they were finding out about events or opportunities at meetings, after they had passed. The role of families of low-income, urban middle school students should begin with basic communication in order to raise student achievement to the levels expected for becoming successful today and to address the myriad social issues facing students in modern society. However, participants felt that there is still a place for the traditional forms of parent involvement, such as serving on advisory committees, fundraising for the school and hosting events at the school.

*Traditional Forms of Parent Involvement*

At the outset of this research, I sought to redefine parent involvement by breaking the “traditional” view of parent participation in schools as limited to parent committees, volunteering and fundraising as an overall support model. However, I found that despite societal changes or this level of schooling’s unique needs relative to elementary schools, there is still a place for some of these more conventional roles. Parents seem to enjoy providing fundraisers and events through their memories of their own parents being involved in similar ways. Additionally, the
school seems to need the parents: either based on district policy (parent representatives on committees); the desire to have parents help run events; or the necessity of having parents to help fundraise for the school. Simultaneously, with the increased need to understand schools as organizations, curriculum standards and testing, education law and more complicated budgets, some of the customary roles that parents once played in schools is no longer needed by schools and intimidating to parents.

This theme, although directly discussed during the interviews, also generated conversations at different times throughout the interviews as well as during meetings, events and informal conversations. This theme is referred to by participants as either areas that participants still believed to be important for parents, or in reference to their outdated nature. Either way, all participants agreed that parent involvement does make the difference in both student and overall school success. One administrator, Dana spoke of parents making the difference within the school system. “In fact, you know, some of the better schools in the city, the parents play a huge role and that is part of the reason why those schools are so successful.” Although the parent role has changed over the years, it clearly does still have a place in making the school successful.

Olivia, a parent, explained the difference in the impact parents have on public schooling today as more of an input and awareness role, rather than as the once-held decision-making authority alongside school personnel.

The parent role should be included in all of [those traditional roles]. It’s not. I find that in the public school system, it is not. I don’t know about other [systems], but it is not [here]. The curriculum is the curriculum. You know, I just asked, ‘what do you plan on doing this year? What is the schedule for what areas you are studying this year? Because it is already set. You know, so I feel like I have no
control over that. Um, as far as the budget, again no. Because in most cases again, in the public school system, the school doesn’t even have control over that. Perhaps this is where the traditional role is still necessary, but changed. Most participants, in interviews and during observations, made it clear that the parental role is now one of advisory and awareness. Parents can give their ideas and input, and be present for decision-making meetings, however there is no guarantee that their contribution will be considered.

All participants agreed that the value of parents on both school site council and on school parent council was essential to ensuring that parent voices are heard. Parent input and knowledge is essential for parents to be able to support the work of the school through these committees and fundraising at the school, and then through their students’ homework and long-term projects at home. Dana, an administrator, spoke of these traditional roles impacting the school.

I would like to see them participate more in the parent activities, the parent, the PTA if you will. And as such, when they have the PTA, when they have the parent council, curriculum could be discussed there. That would be a good forum to bring new ideas, any new curriculum that is coming up. Even to inform the parents about the training that is taking place, the PD’s that are happening for teachers, so they can stay abreast.

This knowledge of curriculum was clearly important to all stakeholders. The school site council is designed as an advisory group to the principal regarding budgetary and curriculum choices, and then used for hiring new teachers. This group meets monthly and is led by the principal with teachers and parents in attendance. Too often though, there were a group of teachers and just one parent, if any at all. Often, when I went to parent council meetings, as an intern, I was reporting out on the school site council as well. To the principal, this council
seemed to feel more intimidating to parents, even to the ones who were very active with the
parent council. The parent council mainly did fundraising and helped run events at the school.
Brenna, a teacher with administrative duties, when referring to the importance of parents staying
informed through the school site council said:

It is their child’s education. It is not my education. It is not the principal’s
education. But there are far too few parents involved in [school site council]. Far
too few. So I think that, short answer, I think that [parents] have a lot of influence
if they are involved. If they are not involved, they have nothing [in terms of
knowledge of curriculum and budget choices].

While remaining informed was important, participants spoke of parents not crossing into
teachers’ professional boundaries. This was also clearly expressed by teachers. Nathan stated:

I think, you know, we are the experts on this. So, I feel very strongly when
parents come into a school and think they know more than the teachers do
because that is what we do. However, input is great. If [parents] feel that they
want some more activities in a certain area, or they feel like their child is not
being prepared enough for a business that they are in and they hope the child will
go into, then that is great. But I think in terms of curriculum [decisions], that is
kind of the responsibility of teachers and the principal to decide where to go.

Similarly, Keith, a teacher with administrative duties expressed his own desire for input.

Curriculum decision, I would like input. In that case, the curriculum decisions
need to be made by professionals. The idea that children or people who have no
idea what is going on [are making these]. Because I went to school, doesn’t mean
that I know how to teach. They are completely separate ideas.”
As much as school personnel do not believe parents should be involved in actual decision-making, parents also do not feel they have the knowledge to do so. The parent Mary said, “I would bow to the teachers and the principal when it came to selecting a curriculum. They are the teachers, that is what they went to school for, I did not.”

When participants spoke about the budget, the feelings were mixed. While administrators felt that parents were key to keeping budgets focused on what parents want, parents were less apt to be involved due to being intimidated by trying to understand an unfamiliar budget. Kerri, an administrator, however, spoke of understanding a school’s budget as a way for parents to check that districts are spending money in the right places.

With budget, you know, again, that would be coming through the school site council. I know the principal said that he had a couple good meetings with the parents on the council about the budget. But, from year to year, that may be the same handful of people. It would be very nice if others came and at least sat in on meetings. If they knew they were happening. If they gave some input, gave some suggestions.

Brian, another administrator, concurred with this statement because parent pressure on the district helps retain extra-curricular activities that are necessary for this age group. He also spoke of parental influence in keeping high expectations and the school’s ability to offer courses for students, which help give them access to college. Without pressure from parents, districts can pass budgets that are not in the best interest of students.

I think budget is a really important one because, you know, schools should be serving what parents want. I think schools need to be very clear about what kids need. You know, parents may not have enjoyed algebra, but kids need algebra in
order to get to a point where kids can be successful in high school or get to college. So I think there is some give and take there, but you look at the Revere for example that hasn’t had art since 2000 or 2001. And that is something that is something that parents want. And, I know that there are families out there who in the past haven’t had chosen the Revere for the simple reason that we don’t have an art class. And I think that it is important for parents to be a part of that.

Despite the administrators’ feelings that parental input impacts budgets in a positive way, parents did not necessarily feel the same. Many parents know that the budget, like the curriculum, is set and feel they cannot have much influence on it. However, in one school council meeting in March, 2009 the principal was breaking down the possibility of adding just one special subject class: foreign language or art. This principal spent the time to narrow the information simply to what the decision came down to, rather than bogging parents and teachers down with large amounts of intimidating information. This resulted in parent approval both by being consulted on the decision and that information was presented in a user-friendly manner. However, with just two parents present, not much of the family population of the school was an influential part of this process.

Kate, a teacher, spoke of the disappointment of not having more parents involved and advocating for special programs in the budget. During the 2008-2009 school year, the principal had pushed to set aside money in the budget for afterschool clubs’ supplies and to pay the advisors of afterschool groups. Kate felt that parents should remain informed through the school council in order to preserve such a positive aspect of the school.

We were so lucky to have money this year to start all of these afterschool clubs. It is great for the parents because the kids are here an extra hour. And they are doing
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something productive. It is great for us because we have been able to develop
better relationships with the kids through the clubs. Stuff like that makes a huge
difference and I think, it enriches their whole education as opposed to just that,
applying to that one hour of the day, it gives the whole climate of the school a
little bit of a boost. And I think parents should have a say in what kind of money
is going to their kids’ schools. Absolutely. I mean technically they are paying for
it.

This program has a lasting, positive affect on the whole school community and should be fought
for yearly by all parties. But the intimidation of budgets and committees seems to drive parents
away. Therefore, even among the small group of very active parents on the parent council, the
school council group which is advisory to the principal on budget, curriculum and hiring is still
intimidating and therefore unappealing, causing parents to be poorly represented.

Instead, the “traditional roles” that parents want to be part of seem to fall to fundraising
and attending events. Mary, a parent, believes the role of families at the school is to fundraise for
special activities and to give students and teachers opportunities within and outside the
classroom that are rewarding and enriching.

I think [my role] is to support [my child’s] teachers. You know because I know
money is tight, especially now, and I don’t think [the school] has enough money
for the things that they need. And even to support the teachers to support the kids.
They do work really hard…and as part of part of the parent council, I think we are
there to help the teachers. We can raise money so the kids can have treats or
rewards for doing a job well done.
In supporting teachers with extra money, the parents can help their students to attend field trips, have special rewards and perhaps enhance classroom instruction.

The teachers agree that this is the key role that has not changed over the years in what parents can do to support their school, even in a low-income, urban area. Todd spoke of this fundraising role in the creation of events to raise money. “And the most they can do, as far as being involved in the school is attending events and you know, getting involved in fundraising or coming up with ideas for fundraising. And just playing an active role in that.” Beth, a teacher, spoke of the influence over the last couple years of having the presence of a parent council at the school again.

But those parents are the parents that know how important those types of [fundraising] things are. And being involved and giving opportunities for their child and other students in the school. Because ideally, that is what the fundraising is for, so that they can do different things. Not just be stuck in the building all year.

Currently, the limited fundraising and number of events are done either by the parents or by the school. There is still the missing link of the whole school community coming together to share in the responsibility and forge ideas to create lasting traditions and raise money to support enriching activities. Olivia, a parent, spoke of this issue.

So again, there needs to be a balance. Where the teachers and the parents get together and discuss what they think is best for the school, the kids. It shouldn’t be all or nothing… Yeah, so on one side you will see that schools handle [fundraising and events] totally, and then in other cases, the parents handle it totally. There needs to be a coming together.
Parents need the teachers and administrators to manage and set up fundraisers and events that the school believes will be beneficial. The parents then need to provide the support for events or fundraising to sustain the tradition and carry out the events or fundraisers. Brian, an administrator, spoke of the parents’ level of interest in the particular fundraiser as the deciding factor for whether fundraisers are effective or not.

But the parents wanted to sell wrapping paper. The parents were excited. They didn’t mind taking the catalogs to work with them and selling them, whereas they didn’t want to take a box of candy bars, for obvious reasons. So, I think it is only through the parent support that certain fundraisers, you know like the night at Papa Gino’s where if anyone from the school goes there, you get 20% of the receipts. You can’t get everyone to Papa Gino’s or Uno’s or all the restaurants that do it, without a lot of parent support.

While the most successful traditional form of parent involvement that has continued through today is fundraisers and events, it seems that there is still an important advisory function with regards to school decisions. Despite this study’s goal of redefining the parent role at the middle school level, these traditional functions are not outdated and may complement the varied responsibility of parents at this level of schooling. No matter how old the students are or how advanced the curriculum, the need for extra-curricular events, fundraising and parental understanding of curriculum and budget choices cannot be replaced.

**Summary of Findings**

The central purpose of this study is to research how adult stakeholders in one school community could work together more effectively for the purpose of raising student achievement at the middle school level. Separately, each theme represents aspects of this topic relevant to this
particular school, as these themes arose directly from participants and data sources. However, most pertinent to this study is the fact that none of these themes could address this topic in its entirety without the others. For example, time and age of students were topics within all other themes despite also having their own significance. Not one participant spoke about either the school or the parent roles without also mentioning the factors that they knew affected these parties from more effectively completing these roles. Despite an attempt to move the parent role in urban middle schools away from the traditional support model approach, there is a place for these conventional functions of parents at school. Finally, whenever discussing the parent role, communication and making a connection at the school for the purpose of students’ educational opportunities were always the ultimate goal each participant intended for parents to reach.

Simultaneously, in order for parents to accomplish this goal, the school had to provide communication in a variety of ways in order to reach all families. The interactions of these themes are perhaps more enlightening than the themes themselves. Therefore, the following interacting theme charts were created to depict just how interrelated and complicated all these goals are to accomplish.
Figure 1. Flow chart of themes

The following theme chart represents a “flow chart” from top to bottom of the various themes that emerged from the data sources and how they impact one another. The lines do not have arrows because it became clear that connected themes interacted back and forth to one another rather than a single cause and affect.

Figure 2. Cyclical Nature of Themes

The following interacting theme chart represents the cyclical nature in which the major factors and roles interact with one another. Again, no arrows are used because all of these themes are interacting back and forth with one another rather than in a single direction of cause and affect. It is important to note therefore, that as each single theme interacts with another, it sets off a chain of reactions throughout the whole cycle.
Figure 3. Role of Parents Based on Themes

The following flow chart depicts the expanded role of parents (from traditional forms) for this age group regarding the essential nature of communication between adults to create a connection between home and school.
Brief discussion of these interacting themes will help lead to understanding of the findings for each research question presented in chapter five. At the heart of this research is a desire to raise awareness and understanding of the unique needs of middle school students. Most existing literature does not directly address this age group, nor does it define or an overarching appropriate role for parents when their children are in this challenging adolescent stage.

Simultaneously, the theme “age of students,” constantly referred to by participants and all data sources throughout each of the other nine themes clearly shows the practical need to address the parent role at this level of schooling. Parents and the school need to communicate and create connections with one another because they cannot rely on adolescents to be accurate or timely messengers and students need to perceive that all adults are working in partnership. The way this age group interacts with adults at this stage in their life leads to both parent and school factors based on the amount of guidance and independence they need simultaneously. The manner in
which roles are formed, both expanded and traditional, derive from the needs of this particular age group.

Similarly, the theme “time” surfaces in all formal and informal conversations concerning roles, factors, beliefs, and actions regarding the topic of parent involvement. In our society today, everyone is strained for time. It is the overarching factor that affects all the other themes: making time to guide adolescents given the economy and demanding schedules in our society; finding the time to carry out the ideal parent and teacher role within home-school partnerships; finding the time to communicate personally in order to make connections and to get involved at the school in traditional ways of fundraising, events and volunteering.

Although affected by all the themes, parent factors, parent roles, school factors and school roles have a unique interaction of a cyclical path in which it is difficult to identify. It is a challenge to delineate where, when or with whom creating more effective home school partnerships began or where, when or with whom to begin repairing them. The major “parent factors” include having young, inexperienced parents of various cultural backgrounds who have not had role models of parent involvement themselves. Parents’ viewpoint of education and of this level of schooling includes considering education as the school’s job and/or seeing their children as older than their actual maturity developmental level. The major “school factors” include a school culture where parent partnerships are not necessarily a priority and where there are no clear systematic expectations. Therefore, teachers tend to focus their interactions with parents on the extreme behavior cases that they must deal with rather than also including consistent positive systems and events to create a culture where parents are valued and interactions can be affirmative. These factors together create the “perfect storm” of reasons for
families to remain distanced from the school and for the school to avoid contact with parents. Therefore, the ideal roles of both the school and home remain just that: ideal.

But the basic roles that both parents and school personnel can play in creating partnerships could be improved if both parties are willing and able to begin to share more of their own time and energy. Students’ benefit when basic parenting such as ensuring that students eat and sleep properly so that they can prioritize school. Simultaneously, students profit when the school tells parents of students at this age level that their parenting and involvement at the school still matters. The school has the ability to create a culture where parents are valued and feel welcome when they do attend meetings and events. At the same time, when parents attend the school, it is most productive when their attitudes regard building relationships and alignments with personnel are positive rather than adversarial. These partnerships allow pertinent information to be shared and parents to continue their role as the primary educator of their child. For all of this to happen, the school should have systematic expectations and forms of communication that parents can come to rely on in order to remain abreast of information and able to communicate with their children and their children’s teachers. Simultaneously, parents must balance initiating the consistent communication with the school to verify what students tell them while also encouraging their children to take responsibility for their work and to allow teachers the room to be the professional educators. Therefore it would benefit the school to find ways to reach out in more through positive phone calls, notes or events so that parents feel their children are valued and seen as individuals. The roles of school personnel and parents depend on one another and cannot be carried out successfully without both parties making more efforts to communicate in positive ways, build relationships and remain united with a focus on the achievement of the student.
Ultimately, the definition of parent involvement at this level of schooling comes down to the themes of communication as the core, creating connections between home and school, using multiple forms to communicate and traditional forms of involvement through committees. The definition is affected directly by the parent and school factors and roles, but they derive from “getting through” all the other themes and deciding to focus on the child to accomplish the best for students. Despite this more prominent redefining of the role to be based on communication and connections, there is still a need for parents to support, help facilitate and even initiate fundraisers to support extra-curricular activities, events that bring the school community together and even the hiring of staff so that parents’ voices are heard in this important selection process. While remaining aware of budget and curriculum choices are critical for parents to help their children at home and to ensure that all programs and enrichments remain as opportunities for their students, it seems that parents prefer to defer to the school personnel on these more professional matters. But having a degree of awareness allows for parents to advocate when they are unsatisfied with their children’s schooling. Remaining aware directly ties into the expanded role of parents today in low-income, urban middle schools: Communication among all adult stakeholders to create connections between home and school for students to remain focused on academics as the key.

With consistent communication through a variety of ways that may include technology, phone calls and letters, all of which may help to build trust and relationships among adults, students then see a unified front and message from all adults in their life that education matters. All of the themes, which were present throughout the data sources, continuously led back to this major perceived appropriate role at the middle school level of schooling: adults must communicate to create a connection that is visible and tangible to students. This perceived role,
the factors that inhibit it from occurring and the gap in practice from beliefs to actions are all further discussed in Chapter Five.

Summary/Preview

From these themes, the data sources and the participants themselves have revealed this very important, relationally-driven topic of home school partnerships and its effects on middle school students. The themes most frequently addressed depict a need to more clearly, yet more broadly define the role of low-income, urban parents during the middle school years. This expansion is needed to meet the needs of this particular age group, the more unique organizational structures of this level of schooling and the high stakes of these transitional years both socially and academically. In Chapter Five, each research question’s findings will be discussed: the perceived appropriate role of parents at this level of schooling; the factors that influence parents during the middle school years aside from previously-addressed aspects in the literature; and finally how the various groups of stakeholders’ beliefs and actions are seen through the lens of sociocultural theory. Finally chapter five will address the limitations to the study, and its implications for practice, policy and further research.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This final chapter will first address each research question’s specific findings. The first research question’s findings suggest the appropriate role of parents in low-income, urban middle schools as perceived by all adult stakeholder groups in this school community. The second research question’s findings present the factors that affect parent involvement particularly at the middle school level. The third research question’s findings address disconnects between values/beliefs and the actions/behaviors actually occurring at this research site. Next, the limitations to this study are discussed. Finally, implications for practice, policy and future research are presented.

Within these findings and implications, there are frameworks used for this discussion. As discussed in Chapter Two, most of the current literature uses the home-school partnership model, which includes building mutual relationships in which expectations and responsibilities are collaborative between school personnel and families. This is in opposition to other perspectives on parent involvement, which imply that the burden is placed solely on parents to participate in ways that support the school. The partnership approach also connects to the literature on relational trust. The literature around relational trust says that without forming trusting relationships based on time and energy spent together, staff and parents are unable to provide common messages to students. Finally, the theoretical framework in which these findings are evaluated is through the lens of sociocultural theory, which evaluates the convergence or divergence of culture and social structures in place regarding home-school partnerships at this middle school.
Presentation of Findings

Each particular research question will now be addressed in light of the themes presented in chapter four through the three major data sources. The findings pertaining to these questions are synthesized and analyzed using the interpretation of the researcher with the background of the 15 months of experience at this site working with all four groups of adult stakeholders.

Perceived Appropriate Parent Role at the Middle School Level

Overall, this study sought to determine the appropriate role for low-income, urban parents at the middle school level as perceived by the four groups of adult stakeholders charged with implementing partnerships between home and school. Through the analysis of the three major data sources, participants themselves revealed 11 essential aspects of the appropriate role for parents as agreed upon across all four major stakeholder groups, which are also supported in the literature. These findings are framed as recommendations based on participants’ interviews, my own observations and the artifact analysis. These 11 recommendations are presented in three major categories. The first three recommendations comprise the parent role in relation to the child. The next five consist of the parent role in relation to the school staff. The final three recommendations relate to the parents’ role in the “big picture” of their children’s education.

Balance Giving the Child Independence within a Level of Parent Control

When describing effective parents of middle school students, the word balance often arose from participants. This came to mean a fluid and flexible adult role, which allowed some independence for the child, yet the adult remaining vigilant. This recommendation of the parental role relates directly to the age of the students. Since children at this age are undergoing a number transitions and changes (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1988), participants felt that parents need to provide the flexible and adaptive parenting that accounts for adolescents’ consistent
transformations. The Carnegie Council (1995) characterized this age group as seeking identity and independence and labeled this time a critical turning point where youth develop either positive or destructive habits and behaviors. School staff felt that parents must have knowledge of developmental changes and be vigilant with their child to assist these transitions. But staff recognized that knowledge of the age group, their personal tumultuous experiences, and then how to handle them is difficult to comprehend as a parent. Teachers with administrative duties and administrators described their observations of parents as often seeing their child as older than they actually are developmentally. This outlook can have detrimental affects as subjects get tougher and students are balancing the expectations of multiple teachers. The National Middle School Association (1995) identified students at this level still needing close guidance and support from parents with the social/emotional changes and struggles, and with multifaceted intellectual and critical thinking skill development.

Parents themselves may feel lost or confused with all the subjects and higher workload expectations, but this is when parents need to work directly with their children to help them navigate their schooling. In many ways, middle school is the time when students learn to make choices, establish study habits, and begin the process of finding their own identity (Carnegie Council, 1995; Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1988). Therefore, the presence of parents to help meet their students’ changes and needs, to provide guidance as they make decisions and to help them to create structure and stability within their lives is important at this phase. The Carnegie Council (1995) asserts that this is the most critical time for teachers and parents to work together to serve this age group. However, school personnel agreed that in order to keep the balance of independence and control for students, there are territorial distinctions. While parents are often found in elementary schools during the day volunteering or picking up the child and spending
time in the school, at the middle school level students need to have their own personal territory at school, but have parent-imposed structures at home.

All participants, parents and school personnel alike, agree that at the middle school level parents must be constantly guiding, yet allowing their adolescent aged child to begin to develop their own identity. This is a very tricky, fluid and flexible role. However to be vigilant of the individual transitions each child is experiencing, parents must remain in communication with their child in order to guide them academically and socially.

**Communicate with Your Child about School and Social Issues**

An additional challenge with children in this age group is their simultaneous reliance on peers and resistance to their parents. But peer advice for decision-making may not always be the most reliable, nor does it consistently lead to productive choices (National Middle School Association, 1995). Participants agree that in order for parents to know what choices a child is making, both academically and socially, they need to regularly communicate with their child about their school day. School personnel felt that students’ benefit when parents remain involved and aware of school assignments, expectations and their peer interactions. Parents spoke frequently of this vigilance as an opening for communication and appropriate interventions.

In numerous parent interviews and during my observations of parent council meetings, parents themselves spoke of the impact their conversations with their children have had on their relationships. Without initiating these conversations and encouraging their children to discuss social choices they make with their peers, parents could not possibly support and guide them towards making constructive decisions.

All participants reflected on the great deal of negative social pressure facing students. Today, adolescents are experimenting with risky behaviors during middle school that once
occurred in high school. Although not every social pressure or issue could be avoided, parents’ determination to communicate consistently with their own child could guide students toward making better choices. However, school personnel and parents felt that at the very least, supporting and processing with students when they have made negative decisions could assist students in future choices. Ultimately, social choices (made even at night and on the weekends) impact a child’s education (National Middle School Association, 1995). Grace, a parent, expressed her involvement at the school as her avenue to remaining connected to her adolescent daughter’s social life, which she knows directly affects her education and future.

And I think that is a big reason to get involved in the adolescent age to open up those doors of communication. Check-ins. Find out what the issues are. The culture that they are involved in, which these days is far more intense than when I was a kid. The media. The computer. The cell phones. The texting. Um, it’s scary at this age because they are not adult enough to make good choices. And they are young enough to be impressionable. And they will just do things impulsively that can impact their development.

When parents insert themselves in their students’ education through communication directly with the child, they set a tone that education is an integral part of the whole family and the aspirations for student success are shared (Hoge, 1997; Singh, 1995). During interviews, many participants’ focused on the parents’ role in having conversations with their students regarding educational updates in order to send a message of priority to students. Participants relayed that these conversations regarding school tended to lead to further connections to the schoolwork brought home.
Connect to the Child, Curriculum and School through Homework

The material at this level of schooling can be very intimidating for low socio-economic parents who often either have not reached a high level of schooling (Norton & Nufeld, 202) or have had negative experiences during their own education (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Throughout the interviews, participants agreed that even if parents cannot do the level of work, all parents have a role in setting the environment, schedule and objective to convey that homework is to be completed and is an important part of family life at home. Doing so sets the tone for a child to succeed in the classroom, especially at this level of schooling, where the reinforcement of concepts and continuation of learning associated with homework develops study habits that prepare students for higher education (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005).

Through both interviews and informal conversations with teachers, it became clear that the role parents can play at home is an essential aspect for students to succeed in their classes (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). School personnel and parents were in agreement that teachers work on the curriculum and organization in school, but at this level of schooling, the concepts and skills cannot be mastered without review at home. Through both interviews of all participants and in my own observations as an intern, students in this age group cannot be relied on to structure themselves, as they are just developing their study habits. Just as teachers set structure in school, parents are necessary for the guidance and expectations at home.

Participants agree that through involvement with homework and projects at home, parents can gain awareness of the curriculum standards. In observing their students, parents can also become cognizant of their child’s developing strengths or needs. School personnel felt that when parents witness the development of their children’s weaknesses and strengths, they can then advocate for resources needed or opportunities for enrichment in particular areas.
Parents spoke of the assistance their students need as they face multiple subject areas, teachers, and expectations for the first time. Parents felt that knowing what the teacher requires is more complicated at this level of schooling with a higher range of standards and a variety of teaching styles. Parents felt that while their child was pulling away to gain independence, they simultaneously were unable to manage the workload, organizational skills and higher expectations. Parents admitted that through monitoring their child’s homework, they become aware of organizational resources such as the binder system and the agenda notebook. Homework gave them a reasonable structure and reason to open up communication with their children. Essentially, the communication parents can have with their children about school helps students to see the connection of school in their home life. Even when kids are of an age at which they no longer confide in their parents or may not accept their parents’ advice, adults need to stay connected to their adolescents through communication, and homework gives them an avenue. Brian, an administrator, stated homework as the primary role of parent involvement at this level.

This is where parents make the connection between home and school, AND with their child. So I think that what needs to happen is a really strong connection between school and home. And let me first say that there are a couple of reasons why that connection has to be strong, either through agenda books, or phone calls or websites, through email, because kids have homework pretty much every night, but kids say they have no homework. And so, for parents to know and really be aware of what the kids are supposed to be doing…But I think that that is sort of the most important role of parents in middle school.
The school personnel and parents agreed that the aspect of homework that is most important is the communication that it allows between the child and parent. However, adolescents are not always forthcoming with information from school, so this communication at home must be complemented with regular forms of communication among adults.

The second set of roles for low-income, urban, middle school parents is the connection and communication with the school personnel. Within this set, there are five recommendations that arose from this study regarding the appropriate connection between home and school at this level of schooling and population of families.

*Proactively Communicate with the School*

The first recommendation within the relationship among adults conveys that parents initiate communication with school personnel. This topic of initiation arose throughout every interview, in many observations and frequently through informal conversations with all four groups of stakeholders. All participants concurred that parents must make this first effort. Regardless of the intimidation factors parents may feel, all participants, including parents felt that teachers at this level of schooling cannot make individualized initial contact unless there is a concern. Once the lines of communication are opened, it does fall to personnel to make parents feel welcome and an important presence in their child’s education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Given the number of students that each teacher serves, parents need to initiate this first step. All participants also agreed that once the lines of contact are open, teachers tend to contact home more frequently for both negative and positive. Kate, a teacher, stated there is an initial bridge teachers need in order to continue the partnership.

At school, I would say to [parents] just, even...communicating…Um, showing up at parent teacher conferences. And I understand people work, they have a
couple of jobs, they have busy schedules. But if you can't show up at parent-teacher [conferences], then send in a note saying how is my kid doing? Call.

Email. We are all pretty open to communication. And, um, I think it is very hard just to get that bridge started.

Even with school personnel stating that parents must make the initial individual contact, the opportunity is actually offered by the staff with the sixth grade orientation in August and the open house for all families in September. Through attending and observing at these events as an intern, these sessions offer a chance to meet teachers, understand the curriculum, know expectations and give school personnel the correct contact information. School personnel feel that if parents choose not to attend these nights or initiate a meeting that does work for their schedule, the conversations may not begin with staff. Multiple administrators and teachers with administrative duties spoke about the open door policy in existence to accommodate parents whenever they visit the school. However, they felt that this policy was unknown to families who did not attend information sessions at the start of the school year. Understanding these opportunities could evolve into more regular communication and meaningful dialogue about students between home and school which can only happen with more time spent together, more informal settings for honest conversations and the development of trust (Comer, 1989; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

When parents do understand the willingness on the staff’s part to respond and do take advantage, their students tend to be the more successful at the school (Jeynes, 2005; Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993). During interviews, in addition to during many informal conversations, a few parents spoke of the difference their initiation with teachers has made for their children’s education. Regardless of the very real barriers that prevent some families from being more
involved in their child’s education, such as their socio-economic status or level of education, the one factor that does overcome the other barriers is a working relationship among adults (Clark, Shreve & Stone, 2004; Jackson & Cooper, 1992). One very important aspect of this initiation is keeping correct contact information at the school. Almost every educator spoke of annoyance with being unable to reach a parent because of frequent address and number changes. This small initiation of letting teachers know when numbers change can make a large difference in the communication the staff upholds with the family.

Often, parents are reluctant to make contact because of their perception that teachers speak in formal, impersonal ways about their child, which is not always meaningful or easy to hear (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). But teachers agree that parents who reach out first to let them know that they are involved set the tone for a more open and honest relationship. Unfortunately, school personnel spoke frequently of the precedent of uninvolved, defensive and unsupportive parents, which has created a negative connotation for many teachers when they think about parent involvement. Teachers spoke of the difference it makes when they know they have parent support. They are more willing to make phone calls and often develop some level of relationship with these families. Parents spoke of the more trusting relationships formed with teachers allowing them to initiate contact with teachers when they observe issues, changes or events at home that might affect the student at school.

The intimidation factor often impedes families from initiating contact, but through more regular informal conversations with staff, their comfort level may increase. This requires the parents to not only initiate contact, but also to attend school events, open houses and perhaps council meetings more consistently. Over the two years I worked with the parents who compose the parent council, I witnessed the level of comfort and knowledge in speaking with school staff
grow tremendously. This has stemmed directly from their consistent initiation of contact and attendance at school events.

*Attend the School Regularly*

Building a base of communication and forming relationships between multiple stakeholders takes time and effort (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007). Connecting for a more meaningful partnership in which expectations are exchanged rather than told to a parent is important for the parent to feel connected (Brown & Beckett, 2007, Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007). For this age group, it is essential that students see and perceive the connection between home and school (Sanders, 1999). More frequent attendance at the school to have informal conversations is needed for these relationships to form (Comer, 1989; Epstein, 1985; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Attendance at the school also allows parents to see the in-depth care and knowledge staff has of their children (Epstein, 1985). The school has recently made an effort to offer more opportunities for parents to attend events at the school with positive connotations. These include: open houses three times a year; two choral concerts; one multicultural show; monthly parent and school council meetings; and a sixth-grade orientation for new families. In addition, there are honor roll ceremonies each quarter and recently, a merit roll ceremony for students that show great improvement or effort. All participants agreed that parents should either take advantage of these sessions when they are offered or should make appointments that do work within their schedules in order for parents to remain consistent with the expectations and guidance of the school during an integral transitional time in their child’s life (Xu, 2004).

While the open door policy has been in place for three years, the school has also attempted to more clearly advertise the policy and their willingness to have parents to the school whenever they can make it. Although this is not ideal for staff at times, as an administrative
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intern, I did witness this policy in place. We would find coverage for teachers to meet with parents, even if it was one at a time and not as a cluster team. Although it is not always easy to make teachers available for parents who showed up during the day without an appointment, it is more important to give families the information they need. The administration has begun to set the tone for these initiatives to be successful through these structures of the open door policy and offering more informal events (Andrews & Moorefiled, 1991; Epstein and Sanders, 2006). Therefore, the opportunities exist for parents to attend the school regularly and parents must attempt to make this effort for the sake of their child’s education. Regular attendance at the school promotes communication and allows parents to help create the partnership between home and school, which students in this age group need to remain focused on their education.

Connect to the School through Direct Communication for a Focus on the Child’s Education

Another major aspect of this parent role in communicating with school personnel is to help adults create a direct connection (Clark, Shreve & Stone, 2004) because participants all agree that children at this age cannot be reliable messengers. Parents and teachers felt that unlike in elementary school, in which students often report home about events, subjects and peer interactions, adolescents communicate with their parents and their teachers much less often. However, this age group cannot afford to see adults divided or even disjointed (Sanders, 1999). For students developing their identity, character, social, emotional and thinking/reasoning self, adults must remember that they are navigating what Epstein (1995) calls, “The Spheres of Influence,” or the school, home and community. Parents’ connections to the school helps build “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992), in which the teacher can better understand the home life to create more appropriate instruction and programs for equity in schools (Ferguson, 2005; Henderson et al., 2007 Jeynes, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). The
goal of this partnership approach is to exchange information and bring consistency to the multiple worlds students are navigating to ultimately raise student achievement (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001).

More regular communication allows contact between the adults involved to feel less formal and awkward, making it more meaningful for each stakeholder to gain insights and information needed to guide students (Henderson et al, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). This requires an even exchange of expectations between school personnel and parents (Jackson & Cooper, 1992). As stated in chapter four by participants, a two way exchange of communication must exist directly between adults, be consistent throughout the school year, include positive conversations about the child as an individual person, and always center on the student’s best interest for the sake of their education.

Despite differences in cultural, linguistic and belief systems between the families and staff at this school, I have observed the very clear, common goal of wanting students to succeed. During informal conversations with parents and during numerous parent council meetings, parents spoke of their own role in connecting with staff for teachers to do their job in the classroom. Multiple parents themselves spoke of relationship-building between teachers and parents as the key for student success. Not only can adults send consistent messages, but also students perceive the mutual respect between home and school, which allows their navigation of the home world and school world to seem more closely aligned. Too often schools leave parents out of the academic process and seek their support only at events and for fundraising.

Just as educators can provide great information to parents regarding their child’s academic abilities and progress, parents can offer great insights regarding the child’s academic
history, social/emotional well-being and even learning styles. The exchange of ideas could help raise student achievement. A first step in this process of partnering with the school personnel for academic achievement is parents responding when the school does contact them or invite them to the school.

*Be Responsive to the School Regarding Academic and Behavioral Issues*

All of the school personnel spoke during interviews and informal conversations about the essential role that parents must take in their responsiveness to the school. Despite sociocultural differences between staff and families (McDermott & Rothberg, 2000), and urban barriers (Norton & Nufeld, 2002), parents must not create a competing mentality (Hoover-Dempsey, 1997) with the staff. This may be difficult with negative communication made with the home. However, a united message from all adults is the most powerful change agent for students (Comer, 2005). When adults are communicating, students’ negative behavior declines (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002) and their academic achievement improves (Jeynes, 2005; Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993). However, school personnel interviewed agreed that the difference in staff’s own level of communication with families depends on the response they have had from parents. If families have not only said they would support the school, but actually shown it in their own actions so that a change takes place in the child, the school is going to partner with them. On the other hand, if a family has either not responded at all or has made empty promises to help get the child on track, then the school feels less obligated to continue contacting the family and/or inadvertently, school personnel are more likely to begin to accept that the student may be able to make only limited progress. Parents and teachers interviewed agreed that students perceive their parents’ priorities and act accordingly.
All participants conveyed that the responsiveness of certain families has provoked more consistent communication. The active parents are aware that they get more phone calls from staff than other families. School personnel outwardly admitted that they do not waste their time contacting families that they know have not been supportive in the past. Staff relies on one another and forms their own plans in the school setting to help students with academic or behavior struggles. If a child is doing well, but teachers have never spoken to the parents, they are not likely to reinforce the child’s strengths by calling home. In both scenarios, students excelling or students struggling, should include parents, otherwise teachers felt discouraged by the multiple roles they are playing.

Both parents and school personnel felt that if staff have to both teach and parent for a group of students with unresponsive families, then the focus remains on these students and the school cannot raise achievement levels for the whole school community. Although this idea arose from participants’ interviews, one major aspect of the partnership approach model is that there is engagement of the whole school community in order to raise standards for all parties, namely the students, staff and parents. Therefore, an essential aspect of the parent role at this level of schooling is partnering with the staff to create one unified team of adults all focused on raising student achievement and supporting students as they reach these new levels.

Create a Unified Team with the Staff

The parent role in connecting with the staff is to help make it clear for students that all adults are working in partnership for the sake of the students’ success (Clark, Shreve & Stone, 2004; Henderson et al., 2007; Jackson & Cooper, 1992; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Sanders, 1999). This does not mean that adults will agree on everything, but they will commit to working together based on the child’s needs, strengths and long-term success (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003;
Brown & Beckett, 2007). During interviews of staff this unification between home and school was stated as analogous to broken family ties. The idea of “mom said no, so go ask dad” or the divided messages often given to children of divorced families were both used to explain how essential the partnership between home and school is for adolescents. When families unite, despite differences of opinion, they create strong bonds that cannot be broken and parents agree that this needed to happen more frequently between staff and parents at this school. Participants from each stakeholder group spoke about this unification to define the partnership as a place where adults come together to understand one another’s expectations for the child’s education.

One way to create this mutual relationship is to bring adults together with the understanding that they need one another (Jackson & Cooper, 1992). School personnel felt that they could guide academic curriculum and standards, but parents must set the expectation that education is a priority. Parents felt that they could provide structures at home for homework and guidance in social choices, but they needed the educational expertise of staff to challenge their students with high standards. Olivia, a parent, expressed the power of this connection.

There shouldn't be a vast difference [between home and school expectations]; it should be consistent. Um, whatever you are reinforcing at home, backs up whatever is being taught at school. And so, as soon as you have an inconsistency, you are setting yourself up for... um, because then there is going to be a battle between home and school. And the teacher is not going to get what they need to get from that child.

Everyone agreed that at this adolescent age, it is more important than ever that students see adults united and communicating, minimizing mixed messages and confrontations. Students
benefit when they receive the consistent message that all adults care about them individually, and are going to support them in their educational goals.

Throughout interviews and informal conversations, school personnel expressed passionately that the school couldn’t educate students in isolation from their home. Despite parents not having a degree in education or even a high level of education they can set a tone in their home that education matters, create structures to complete assignments, and help their children access resources such as libraries and community programs. The reality of the parents at home having a large influence on their children’s education at school brings us to the third set of recommendations in defining the appropriate parent role in low-income, urban middle schools:

The three “big picture” roles parents play with regards to education.

*Be Aware of Curriculum Standards and Decisions Made at the School*

All participants agree that in order for parents to be able to help their children succeed in school, communicate with them about their education, and connect with school personnel about their strengths, needs and long-term goals, parents need to be aware of the school’s curriculum and environment. This knowledge allows the lines of communication with their children to be opened and for aspirations to be shared during an important transitional time (Hoge, 1997; Singh, 1995; Xu, 2004). Parents may be able to build a more positive relationship with their child and take ownership of their role as parent (Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997; Ramirez, 2004). In starting these conversations, parents are then able to oversee and guide the student through the multiple subject areas and demands of having various expectations of multiple teachers. Having this knowledge may allow parents to advocate for their child more frequently when communicating with school personnel (Ramirez, 2004) as well as build up their own feelings of self-efficacy in making a difference in their child’s education (Bandura, 1986;
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Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1992; Ramirez, 2004). Participants spoke frequently regarding the need for parent awareness, despite cultural, language, educational and socio-economic barriers.

As stated in chapter four, however, through informal conversations with all stakeholder groups, observations at school council meetings and during interviews, all parties agree that parent involvement with curriculum stops at the decision-making level. This is due to a new level of teacher and administration training, in which educators seek to retain the power of decisions, as they are the experts in curriculum and instruction. Throughout interviews of both school personnel and parents, all stakeholders agreed that parent input is essential, but that their role in academic decisions remains at the awareness level. However, all participants also felt that parents can take advantage of opportunities to gain information through some more traditional forms of parent involvement.

*Give to the School Community through Traditional Forms of Parent Involvement*

All participants in this research agree that despite societal and educational changes today, there is still a place for parents to get involved in the traditional ways in schools. These include: creating and attending events for the school community; initiating and participating in fundraisers to raise money for extra-curricular programs; participating on parent or school councils; volunteering at the school for events or assistance with major projects; serving on a hiring committee for staff; or providing a resource to the school in the form of speakers or a service based on personal expertise. The traditional roles found in this study strongly resemble aspects of Epstein’s (1995) six-tiered levels of involvement and other versions found in the literature (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, 1987; Manz, Fantuzzo and Power, 2004). While there is still a place for these responsibilities, it is important to make clear
that these are not the most important roles for raising student achievement in a low-income, urban middle school. Although participants discussion of these aspects are explored in this section, the above roles of communication, connection and support at home were more significantly and frequently spoken of throughout interviews, discussed during meetings and reflected as a need in artifacts.

Probably the most talked about traditional role that parents provide for the school community is the initiation of and participation in fundraising and events. However, parents at this school spoke of their frustrations with other parents for not giving their time to get involved in this way. With only a small group of parents on the council, it is difficult to be able to do a lot with only a limited number of people able to give their time and energy. These parents spoke of the lack of understanding and clarity for the purpose of fundraising. Some parents spoke of supporting enrichment afterschool programs or field trips through events and fundraising. Other parents spoke of the purpose of fundraising to show support for teachers. At this school, this comes in the form of a yearly teacher appreciation breakfast and a spaghetti supper. However, these parents were unsure that uninvolved parents were aware of these worthy purposes. Another benefit of fundraising or events is the possible support of the larger community around the school. Some of the school personnel spoke of the connection that parents have with the community and therefore are able to be the positive driving force for the school’s fundraising, which then helps the school make a stronger connection with the community (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Smalley & Reyes, Blanes, 2001). Nathan stated:

Parents have always been great fundraisers because they are out in the community, they work in the community, they know the businesses and the jobs,
and I think fundraising should be on the parents because the money they have is going to go directly to the students.

Parents can provide the necessary help for event success or even for the resources to hold events. One parent spoke of tapping the resources within the parent community, especially given the financially challenging times, and of how important it is to look to human resources already located within the community. Through parent involvement, families have the ability to get more parents interested in the school and perhaps sharing of their own time and abilities. Staff relayed that schools in Roslyn with active parents tend to have large, productive parent councils. Involvement becomes cyclical and part of the culture. Parents then lead one another to have a “voice” in the education of children in low-income areas. Social capital can be gained within the parent population and then more students’ benefit from the resources made known and sought.

While giving time may not always be easy for families, it is the way that parents maintain essential input in their children’s education. Parents have to be present at the school through meetings and events in order to be aware of decisions, changes and choices the school or district is making for students. This broader involvement for the good of the whole school community is important. But the current disappointment in the parent population was relayed by all groups of stakeholders throughout interviews. It was also spoken of regularly during parent council meetings and during informal conversations regarding parents at the school. Therefore, a negative culture regarding parent involvement at this school is perpetuated rather than broken.

Mary, a parent, expressed this frustration with parents at the school allowing this culture to exist.

Show up at the meetings. I don't think there is any other way to get your voice heard. Calling up and complaining isn't going to do any good. I don't know what parents could be doing except show up and pitch in to help.
Another traditional aspect of parent involvement is the involvement in the hiring of staff. During one school council meeting, the principal asked the two parents present to sit in on a hiring process for a new teacher for the following school year. The parents seemed both honored and intimidated. The principal assured them that their opinions were valued and that he would help prepare them for the process. These parents gained insight into a different aspect of the school and had the opportunity to spend time with a committee of staff.

A final traditional role of parents is the recruitment and retention of parents on councils and in getting involved with events and fundraising. Parents who have had positive experiences at the school through their involvement have traditionally both passed on this message and recruited other parents to further the involvement. Having larger groups of parents involved disseminates the workload, perhaps increases the number of parents involved, and creates a whole-school approach to a positive school climate around parent participation (Comer & Haynes, 1991, 1993; Epstein, 2005a; Hoover-Dempsey, 1987; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004).

In working with this parent council, it was clear that this core group of five completely relied on one another and even checked with one another previous to meetings to be sure they were each attending. The comfort of one another helped them to stay involved and persevere despite the workload on just a few.

Make Education a Priority in Your Child’s Life

Throughout the interviews, all participants agreed that prioritizing education for the child’s sake is the greatest role parents can take in low-income, urban middle schools for student achievement. Despite parents’ own levels of education or personal experiences with school, the stakes are too high for students today considering standardized testing and the need for a college education to become meaningfully employed (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007;
Leaving No Family Behind

Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). Jeynes (2005) and Davis-Kean (2005) found that more than educational levels, socioeconomic status and cultural background, the most important aspect that parents can provide is a nurturing home for an emotionally stable environment. Parents must join with the school to send a very clear message: education matters and it benefits the child to treat school as their priority (Brown and Beckett, 2007; Clark, Shreve and Stone, 2004; Comer, 2005; Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007; Smalley and Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Students may take school less seriously if their life at home does not enforce the importance of education or support them in the institution of schooling, in which perhaps their parents, family and close neighbors may have not succeeded (Epstein, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Norton & Nufeld, 2002).

With the difference in cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds between many of the staff and the families they serve, students need to be aware of a connection between their own home communities and their educational life, rather than perceiving school as a remote place they go for six hours a day (Howey, 2000; McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). School personnel expressed that students may not believe teachers’ broader perspective of education as an empowering means towards a successful job and life for them. But when parents emphasize a priority on school, learning takes on a new meaning for the child. Parents at Revere spoke of witnessing the lack of concern many parents have for their children’s education and the negative affect it has on the school community. They are aware of behavior issues in classrooms and the disruption to learning that occurs as a result of inactive parents.

The parents on the parent council have spoken of their membership as a means to send a message to their children that education matters. These parents have relied heavily on the relationships formed with teachers to remain updated on their child’s academic, social and
emotional progress during this very difficult period of parenting. Parents felt that despite personal backgrounds or hardships, families can still send a message that education matters for their children’s success. All stakeholders expressed that regardless of parents’ own experiences setting aside feelings to focus on their child’s education and future is necessary. Education is a way out of poverty-stricken, drug-infused and crime-driven communities (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). In these neighborhoods, the most important thing a parent can do is to take the stance that their child’s education is a priority and that the household will reflect this outlook in every way possible, given the high stakes of the middle school level of schooling for students’ futures (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). Despite these essential roles for effective home-school partnerships, there are some very real factors that impede this culture from forming at this school.

*Factors that Affect Appropriate Parent Involvement*

The second research question sought to find the reasons and means by which productive home-school partnerships are impeded. Despite an array of literature regarding barriers to parent involvement, this study attempted to look more closely at the middle school level to find unique barriers that differed from those found in elementary and high schools. During the interview and data collection process, participants referred to many of the low-income urban barriers researched and described in existing literature. However, throughout this study, participants also emphasized some very real factors that exist which extend beyond pre-existing literature. Therefore, these are also discussed. Overall, there are two major categories of factors affecting parent involvement: the intangible, qualitative factors that are based on parents’ individual beliefs; and the more tangible, measurable factors that could be evaluated with regard to
families’ contexts. Next, factors related to the school personnel and social structures in place are reviewed. Finally, the larger context of the district and implicit societal factors are assessed.

**Intangible Parent Factors**

Since parenting is such a personal topic, how families choose to parent in relation to their children’s schooling can be difficult to measure quantifiably (Ferguson, 2005, Jeynes, 2005). In addition to the qualitative nature of personal beliefs, it became evident during the data collection process that parents’ views regarding their role may change over time: as their children develop and mature, parents’ needs regarding their children may differ; parents gain personal experience and wisdom throughout their children’s phases of development; and parents may base their own beliefs on the role they perceive the different levels of schooling require them to play. Therefore, measuring parents’ values in a tangible, statistical method would be difficult to accomplish accurately. However, discussions regarding precipitating factors that affect beliefs were explored by all participants because they agreed that parents’ personal beliefs about their role is the single most important factor concerning how they participate with their children and partner with the school personnel. These intangible belief systems identified by participants in this study closely resemble the socially determined role constructs, feelings of efficacy, perceptions of schools an motivational factors previously studied in the literature in chapter two (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005).

According to the data in this study, there is a range of parent beliefs that most often result in a lack of parent involvement at this school. These include: parents not knowing they have responsibilities; what those tasks might entail; and parents deciding their child is old enough to
take responsibility for their education. Dana spoke powerfully regarding the lack of realization parents have about the impact their involvement could have on their children.

But I would tend to think that the majority, a good majority of the parents, don't necessarily know their role, or what they think their role should be, other than to make sure that their kid goes to school everyday. They have trust, they have entrusted that the school will take care of everything and will let them know what is going on. I don't think that they realize how much influence that they could have. I don't think that they realize that their participation in one form or another, does count.

Because of the array of parent approaches to participating in their children’s education, stakeholders often addressed factors they felt influence the way in which parents develop their own belief systems. There are six value-based factors presented below discussed by participants in interviews and informal conversations, and observed at meetings.

*The models or examples parents have had.*

Since parenting does not come with a guide on how to make correct choices or a formula that works for each child, many skills, ideas and decisions are affected by how the parents themselves were raised. Participants revealed that perceived appropriate family roles vary greatly based on the modeling of the previous generation. The outcomes therefore ranged from extremely involved to completely uninvolved and everywhere in between. School personnel spoke of working with parents who have admitted having had poor examples set by their own parents. These parents spoke of having made it on their own and therefore believing that their children should have to do the same, perhaps not realizing the high stakes placed on education
today for future job security. In addition, staff spoke of parents who have had very positive examples of highly involved parents and the difference in their outlook for their own children.

Parents also spoke of these examples being powerful. All of the active parents interviewed spoke of the appropriate role their parents modeled. In particular, Olivia had a compelling story regarding her own mother’s example.

I have seen [involvement] work. You know, I am the oldest of seven children and that is how my parents were with us. And um, we all went to school, we all stayed out of trouble…But [my mother] was very proud to say that none of her kids have ever been arrested for anything. And having seven children, that is a record accomplishment living in the city. Yeah. But, she didn't slack off just because we became adolescence. That didn't happen. She was very consistent, that is the thing, consistency is very important.

Parents’ model of family participation in education can be an influential aspect that affects their own choice to get involved. Another aspect is the maturity and stability of parents themselves. 

*Age of parents.*

Frequently, parents in low-income neighborhoods are young, a factor that has been raised in discussions on parent involvement (Norton & Nufeld, 2002). With young parents, they may not have the maturity or support around them to make their children’s education a priority (Ferguson, 2005). Participants felt that young parents also perceive their own child’s adolescence as a time to give more independence to the child than they are actually ready to handle because of parents’ own responsibilities at a young age. Brenna, as a teacher with administrative duties, spoke of witnessing this:
And a lot of the parents had a child when they were younger…they are almost making up for the childhood they missed by now thinking their child is old enough to be home with the younger brother or sister and can take care of them. And yeah, is old enough to be home for a couple of hours, but not until midnight, not playing the role of the parent. And so I think some of the parents, they had to do the same things when they were younger and think that is just what you do.

Younger parents in particular seem more likely to repeat generational trends with their own children based on the model they have experienced. The issue of young parents persists unless there is intervention and a determination on the part of individuals to break this cycle. For example, Olivia spoke of her conscious decision to have her kids when she was older and in a more financially stable position to be able to stay home and remain focused on their well-being. She also recognized that not everyone has that option when they have children young and may not be in a position to focus on their children’s education. Olivia along with many of the school personnel felt this issue is a trend in low-income, urban communities and tends to become an exacerbated issue when students reach middle school and require close attention yet constantly push away adults. Students at this age may appear physically old enough to handle more responsibility, but may not have emotionally and intellectually developed enough to make productive decisions and care for themselves.

*Cultural background of parents.*

Although the cultural background factor is spoken of in the literature (Hoover-Dempsey, 1997; McDermott & Rothenberg, 2002), the findings from this study focus on the barrier generated as a result of parents’ lack of knowledge of the American education system. This becomes significant at the middle school level where standardized testing and grades become
important for high school choice in the Roslyn Public Schools, which also put students on track for college. Participants spoke of the cultural differences regarding education and the role of parents versus that of the school in educating youth. Many parents at this school were raised in cultures in which it was disrespectful to question the teacher or anything within the territory of their teachers’ profession, therefore making attendance at the school seem moot. But this lack of presence in the school affects parents’ understanding of how to navigate the American education system in terms of the curriculum expectations, benchmark standards students must reach at each grade level, and the standardized testing created to measure student understanding.

All participants agree that it can be difficult to navigate a system that parents did not experience themselves. In addition, aside from one open house at the beginning of the year, schools may not continuously educate parents specifically on what their role at home could be to best support their child’s education. Liz, a teacher, spoke of her experience with a father who clearly did not understand the expectations in the United States about the attainment level of education.

We have a lot of parents who are from other countries and don't know our educational system. They don't understand what happens after middle school and high school… I had someone from Jamaica come to me and literally ask me, “So, as an eighth-grade teacher, so is my son done now?” I said, “I don't know what you mean by done.” “I mean done with school.” “No, they have four more years and then they have college.” And he didn't have a clue. And his kid, is...was so bright and could have done so much, and now, he has a baby girl.

This teacher is the co-developer of the Algebra I eighth-grade initiative program at the school. For the first time, a Roslyn Public School middle school is offering Algebra I to eighth graders.
This is done in many suburban schools in the area to give students with the math scores and abilities the chance to enter high school with an algebra credit. These credits put students on track for advanced math coursework in high school and then either to place out in college or move onto higher-level courses. But, without a parent pushing students, they may be less likely to take advantage of these opportunities, or even to pursue higher levels of education. With the number of immigrant families continuing to increase, this lack of familiarity with the American education system will be a factor as parents try to make appropriate choices about participating in their children’s education as students progress to higher school levels. These cultural values may also affect whether education is considered a priority at home.

*The priority parents place on education.*

Throughout this study, many participants referred to the correlation between the personal beliefs regarding the parent role and whether parents then prioritize education. For many parents who were either unsuccessful in school themselves or have struggled with their child’s schooling since the child was young, it can be difficult to put aside negative memories for the sake of their child’s future (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Participants felt that parents who have had negative encounters with schools seem to give up at the middle school level on influencing their child’s education. This may be there frustration with school personnel, the system in general, or previous years of negative interactions regarding their child at the elementary level.

For the school personnel it is discouraging to have parents who have accepted their child’s grades without attempting to support them. Additionally, without a family partnership, the job of educating a student in isolation can feel daunting for staff. School personnel and active parents felt that education is not an isolated activity or minimal part of a child’s life. Participants
spoke of the 18 years children spend being influenced by the academic content, the thinking skills, and the character development that occurs at the various levels of educational institutions.

Parents who do believe in placing a priority on education model the importance of education for students by communicating with staff, attending open houses and perhaps getting involved on a higher level with councils or events. For example, John spoke of advocating for the best in his child’s education. He knows his involvement helps the school personnel and instills the value of education within his son.

Directly, um, probably um, just keeping him on the front burner, and making sure his homework is done and you know, asking questions about school. And letting him know that school is very serious. So, I put that on the front burner at all times…I want to see my son get a good education and get the best out of the Roslyn Public Schools. The best education that is possible.

While students do need to become more independent socially and academically, parents who prioritize their child’s education know that adolescents still need guidance in navigating school.

Parents’ beliefs about this age group.

Participants spoke frequently about the aspect of parents’ priorities on education being affected by their beliefs about this age group. Since students range in their levels of maturity and points of transition, understanding the balance of guidance and independence for your own child varies greatly for parents (Carnegie Council, 1995; Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1988; National Middle School Association, 1995). Brian, an administrator, stated what many of the school personnel felt:

I think that for some, a percentage of parents, when their kids get to middle school, there is sort of this assumption, well, they are grown, they don't need as
much support as they did in elementary school. I would argue that you almost
need it more.

Although middle school students may look older physically, their intellectual maturity does not
necessarily match their physical appearance (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1988, National Middle
School Association, 1995). In my own observations at this school and through informal
conversations with all stakeholder groups, it is clear that with personal transitions compounded
with raised standards of school, multiple subjects and teachers, students need structure and
guidance from home. Brenna spoke of why the title “adolescence” was created for this age
group. “You know, and I can't emphasize enough, they are children. And unfortunately, I believe
that most parents are thinking they are young adults. No they are not, they are adolescents. And
there is a reason they call it adolescence.” Students are still not mature enough to make
appropriate decisions consistently, especially since many social and academic choices have long-
term consequences.

While students may be giving their parents the message that they desire more
responsibility and control over their own lives, parents must continue to guide their children.
Otherwise, students may get into situations that have negative effects. Nathan, a teacher,
reflected on this balance:

Not being too overbearing, but being overbearing enough so that students know
that the parents are there and not caring as many freedoms as a high school
student might have. And sometimes I think that is confusing to parents.

Sometimes they think once they hit middle school, okay we can leave them alone
completely and they fail. So what we see is, kind of this, parents don't know how
to balance that very well. And they tend to leave the kids alone until it is too late.
Participants felt that parents need to view this age group as the transitioning adolescents they are. Students need to remain focused on their academics at home in order to succeed at school. But parents’ ability to have an impact on their child’s education is based in part on the parents’ own degree of comfort at schools.

*Parents’ comfort level at schools and the effect on their children.*

Another major factor that influences parents’ beliefs about their role is their own comfort level around schools and education in general (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). While this factor has been discussed in the literature regarding urban barriers (Norton & Nufeld, 2002), the unique characteristic that arose in this study is that students at this age are able to perceive how their parents’ discomfort affects their own efforts in school. Past experiences incur a great deal of associated memories and emotions (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). For many parents, the value they currently place on education is greatly influenced by their own convictions regarding educational institutions, which have been formed over time (Lawrence-Lightfoot). While elementary aged students may still remain engaged and enthusiastic about learning, adolescents need more motivation as the workload is more difficult and expectations are higher. Brenna, a teacher with administrative duties, acknowledged how difficult rethinking reactions to school can be for families, but also how necessary it is for parents to have perspective for their children’s sake.

[I would like parents] being a lot more positive about [school]. Saying, “hey, this is a lot more, times have changed”, and depending on their circumstances, depending on where they grew up, how old they are, you know, there are so many factors, you could never possibly narrow it down. And so it is kind of like, you want to say, “let bygones be bygones, but now let's focus on your child and let’s work together.”
But prior negative beliefs are not easily shifted without time and energy put into building relationships and dismantling preconceived notions that have developed over the years (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). These necessary culture shifts will be explored further when evaluating this research through the sociocultural theory later in this chapter.

The six factors above (the models or examples parents have had; age of parents; cultural background of parents; the priority parents place on education; parents’ beliefs about this age group; parents comfort level at schools and the effect on their children) relate to the values and beliefs that affect how parents determine their perceptions of their own role. While belief systems are more difficult to measure due to their intangible nature, they have the most significant effect on parents’ decisions about whether to get involved at the school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005).

**Tangible Parent Factors**

In addition to the more intangible factors that affect parents’ beliefs regarding their roles in their child’s education, there are also more measurable, tangible factors that impede parents’ participation in their child’s education. Some of these factors are represented in the literature around urban parent involvement (Cooper & Cristie, 2005; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Norton & Nufeld, 2002) but were spoken of by participants in this study from the perspective of the middle school level of schooling.

**Access to technology.**

One of the major areas that school personnel discussed as an appropriate role for parents is getting involved via communication, including the use of newer technologies such as email, cell phone messages and a list serve with a website. However, to include parents through their use of technological communications, it is necessary that families have access to the technology
itself and the training to use it appropriately. Many participants believed that parents had access
to the Internet and an email account through work, but would have to get in the habit of checking
them. In addition, cell phones are a very regular form of communication today, even more so
than landlines in homes. But these types of phones are turned on and off frequently based on bill
pay as well as numbers change when parents open new accounts. Therefore the level of
consistency, accessibility and ability to use technologies may limit parents. This factor is a real
concern for parents’ ability to carry out the appropriate role identified as communication
effectively if they do not have the resources or knowledge to utilize these technologies.

Family situations.

While student’s family situation can be a factor at any level of schooling, the data in this
study reveal that contextual issues can exacerbate the lack of parent involvement at the middle
school level. Having a stable home with two parents vigilantly guiding the student together is
ideal for adolescent students experiencing great transitions, pushing for their own independence,
possibly experimenting with risky behaviors and being challenged at higher levels academically.
However, in low socio-economic, urban neighborhoods, family structures often vary including
single moms, extended family raising children, or two parents both working long hours (Griffith,
1998; Norton & Nufeld, 2002). Participants in this study felt that the additional issues with this
age group can be challenging for single parents (usually single moms), older guardians, or
parents who are not at home to guide their adolescent’s free time. Edward, a father, spoke of the
lack of both male and generally stable role models in children’s lives today.

Like I said before, a lot of these kids don't have a father or anything like that, so it
is kind of a difficult situation, um, for them and they need as much support as they
can, I mean there are a lot of kids out there with a lot of potential, just going to waste because their parents don't, you know, they are not involved in their lives.

Brenna, a teacher with administrative duties, spoke of the additional challenge that some of their families face with homelessness and frequent shelter changes, never getting familiar with one community or the school.

We have a lot of people, well, maybe not a lot, but a good amount that are homeless. And so, they bounce around from community to community. Because we have quite a few that end up in various districts, and I don't exactly understand how, but wherever they are going, they are not used to the community. So the kid gets on the bus and [their parents] have no idea where [the school is] located.

Participants recognized that family situations are a factor at every level of schooling and even in every socioeconomic level of community. However, school personnel and parents involved in this research agree that at this particular age, when students are pushing adults away and relying more on the advice and guidance of their peers, the lack of stable family life intensifies the issue of adolescents making choices that could have long-term detrimental consequences. The family situation is itself affected by the economics, work situation and availability of the parents.

Families’ economics and time.

Although long work hours and economic status are reviewed in the literature as factors (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Manz, Fantuzzo & Powers, 2004; Shumow & Harris, 2000; Smith, 2002), in this study they are spoken of with a different urgency and reality than ever before. Given the hard economic times for our country and every state, city and town, this is a very real factor today. Participants spoke of the need for parents to work multiple jobs to pay bills and feed their family. That schedule takes precedence over sitting down to family dinner to discuss
their child’s day or reviewing homework. It also means that parents do not ask for time off to attend school meetings or events. Brian, an administrator, revealed how real this factor is for families.

I think what we are seeing right now is a lot of parents who are afraid to ask their boss to come in an hour late, you know, to leave an hour early to come to the school. They are afraid that if they do that one time too many, the next round of job cuts; their name will be on the list.

In addition to work and economic stress, many families rely on public transportation to get to their multiple jobs and pay for the city’s high cost of living. Not only are parents working long hours, but also public transportation adds to commuting hours. Since the placement of students in the Roslyn Public Schools is based on zoned areas and not necessarily on neighborhoods, parents may additionally experience a long commute to attend the school. Finally, the Revere has the district’s early school hours from 7:20am until 1:30pm. This school schedule does not necessarily allow parent’s work schedules to coincide with when teachers are available. The combination of hard economic times, long work hours with multiple jobs is not necessarily conducive to parents meeting with teachers to create these necessary partnerships for the middle school aged student. Even when parent-teacher meetings are attempting to be scheduled, there is often the additional factor of language barriers to schedule and carry out meetings.

Parents’ language barrier fears.

In the literature, the language barrier is generally reviewed as a concern of the school in terms of its responsibility to provide interpreters and make families feel comfortable (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005; Norton & Nufeld, 2002). However, even when the Revere provided interpreters at one report card conference night, I observed that parents of these
languages still did not attend the open house. Throughout this study, participants referred to the language barrier “fear” that language differences cause in parents, despite school efforts. This very real anxiety, which manifests itself in lack of attendance, has now turned into the norm at this school: school personnel do not expect parents who don’t speak English to attend events or conferences. Denise, a parent from an immigrant family and who works with early childhood programs in the city, spoke of language being the prominent impediment to parent participation even at her work. “If there is a language barrier, then they are not going to [attend the school]. I tell you from experience with working with families here [at work]. That is the number one barrier from authority and they are afraid of it.” She further expressed that school institutions can be considered authority figures.

At this age level, when academic grades, standardized tests and making high school choices all influence the child’s long-term educational goals and achievement (Carnegie Council, 1995; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005), this factor can be detrimental. Without an adult guiding each student through these processes, students may not understand the outcomes of the choices they make (Hunt, Wiseman & Bowden, 1988; National Middle School Association, 1995). At the high school level, students are assigned guidance counselors, but in a middle school of approximately 500 students, the one student development counselor cannot possibly direct all students without parents’ assistance. Participants felt that more communication between teachers and parents could bridge this gap if parents could make a connection with a teacher they trust and rely on them when questions arise. The language barrier creates an even greater anxiety when parents also have a lower level of education.
Parents’ level of education.

Throughout interviews, school personnel often spoke of not judging or even believing that the parents’ own level of education mattered. In spite of parents’ own educational levels, it is important that they put their child’s education first, set a tone that education is a priority and create structures in their home for homework, studying, reading and projects to be completed. This same viewpoint was shared by Ferguson (2005), Jeynes (2005) and Davis-Kean (2005), which reflected that a nurturing home environment in which students feel emotionally stable can overcome parents’ educational levels and other low-socioeconomic, urban barriers. However, despite personnel and researchers believing parents’ level of education does not matter, participants revealed that parents’ personal fears regarding their own education levels often hinders their involvement. The deficit in their own education causes a barrier to seeking the information and resources that may allow them to advocate for their child’s education.

Part of the lack of familiarity regarding resources and advocacy choices underprivileged parents have for their children is their lack of communication not only with staff, but also with other parents who may be able to provide the “social capital” (Coleman, 1988) needed to empower parents to make a difference in their child’s education. Work by Kahne and Bailey (1999) and Stanton-Salazaar (1997) show that through school connections, parents can overcome the disparity in information and resources low-income parents have to navigate the school system. However, the culture of parent involvement for the purpose of learning from other parents does not currently exist at this school.

The number of other parents involved.

Parents participating in this study felt that promoting involvement of parents both to advocate for their own children and to participate more broadly in the school community as a
whole could be created through a shift in the culture at this school. Many studies have shown that when the whole school systematically integrated parents into the school community, more effective outcomes arose (Comer & Haynes, 1991, 1993; Epstein, 2005a; Hoover-Dempsey, 1987; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004). The small parent council group often spoke of how hard it was to decide to join the council year after year knowing how few parents are involved and the amount of work they would have to do as a result. Mary, from the parent council, expressed her frustrations:

It is disheartening. There are just not enough parents in the elementary level or the middle school level. And so, even if you do have some time you do want to volunteer, you end up doing a lot more than you really can because there really are no other volunteers and things just have to get done for the kids.

Other parents spoke of the need to create a more naturally-occurring culture in which parental participation engenders more parent involvement. This is related to research based on the need for parents’ roles to be clearly defined (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000), and meaningfully established for parents to feel they make a difference (Comer & Haynes, 1991) so that relationships can be built among adults (Clark, Shreve & Stone, 2004; Epstein, 2005a).

Parents on the council spoke often that if only parents would come to meetings and events, then they could experience and feel the same benefits these members feel. Active parents spoke particularly of the positive aspects that have emerged from their own participation: positive relationship with their own children have remained intact through adolescence; their advocacy for their child through the relationships formed with staff has increased; and the mutually shared parenting advice with others on the council has been invaluable.
The long-term benefits that families receive from partnering with the school for their child’s education should be the impetus for parents to put in the time and effort. But just as there are factors created by parents themselves regarding home-school partnerships, there are also factors that the school creates which impact parents’ choices to participate.

**School Factors**

As professional educators, the school personnel themselves have a large influence on home-school partnerships. This is supported by the literature stating how important the school’s general invitations, welcoming nature and clear demands placed on parents are to these partnerships (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005). The following four factors, which are based on this school’s culture and structures, affect families’ choices and levels of involvement.

1. **General openness and accessibility of the school personnel.**

With the multifaceted layers of structures and cultures in schools, priorities in schools are set by the tone of the administration (Bender-Sebring & Bryk, 2000; Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007; Fullan, 2003; Rutherford, 1995; Rutherford & Billig, 1995). When the idea of accessibility and openness of the school was mentioned by any participant in this study, they immediately began with comments regarding how the administration of the school sets this tone. This starts with the message to all families that the school is open to them and wants them involved. Some of the teachers spoke about more recent efforts by the administration to send home all-call messages and letters to remind families about open houses set on the calendar. Some of the parents spoke about the appeal of an administration that is transparent and supports their participation. Grace discussed this as the broader administration support and appreciation of her work with her child at home and the broader participation with the parent council.
If the administration is enthusiastic, inviting, presents a culture of cooperation, then I definitely would want to get involved. Um, because then you know that your small part is making a difference. As opposed to working in an environment where there isn't that, that kind of support. You just don't feel that whatever you can contribute is going to make a difference.

Parents need to perceive support for their efforts and contributions from the staff to know that their involvement makes a difference (Epstein, 1986; Griffith, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Burow, 1995; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; McDermott & Rothberg, 2000). One aspect of this is the administration setting the precedent that the main office is a welcoming place. Parents’ first impressions of a school begin with the office, whether for basic information or to voice a concern. Administration’s model provides for staff how parents are valued and treated with respect at the school. The administration spoke of how key it is to be able to get parents the information they need whenever they arrive at the school. At the Revere, this tone is set by the “open door policy” that the administration has formed and the teachers are asked to help enforce. This policy creates a structure, which ensures that parents are allowed to come to the school without an appointment, which is unique in schools in this district. Brian, an administrator, explained the significance of this policy.

I think the thing that we do that do foster [a welcoming environment] is that you don't have to call to make an appointment. I think that if a school requires a parent to call and make an appointment...you know if something, if you are really worried about something and you can't get up here to solve it, then I think it builds frustration and it builds resentment towards the organization. You know, so I think that [open door policy] is really important.
Already actively involved parents also spoke of this policy as a major aspect of their feeling of inclusivity in the school culture and willingness to work with the staff. This open door policy allows the staff, and not just administration, to feel more accessible to the parents. Because of it, teachers seem to go more out of their way to be accessible to parents who come to the school and who call or email. The teachers with administrative duties expressed their flexibility to parents’ schedules for phone calls, emails, etc. While this open door policy is clearly the procedure and plan at the Revere, the issue is not in the philosophy, but in the whole school implementation and genuine investment. Without consistent forms of communication to reach all families, many parents do not know this accessibility exists and are unable to take advantage of its usage.

*Procedures for communication by the school (who/when/how).*

From observations at this school and personal experience at others, the elementary school structure seems to allow for clear policies around folder systems, classroom parents and more frequent parent-teacher communication because of one base classroom teacher. Ironically, the middle school level struggles with these same types of systems despite higher academic stakes, multiple teachers and students who are less forthcoming with notices or information (Epstein, 1996; Lounsbury, 2000; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Rutherford & Billig, 1995; Sanders, 1999). This level of schooling is evidently lacking in consistent forms and procedures for who communicates with home and for when this happens so that parents can come to expect contact or reach out to the proper school personnel. Brian spoke of this issue directly.

I think that part of what happens the way that we are set up, is that there are too many people responsible for calling parents on a tough case. And it also puts more teachers off the hook. I really strongly believe that if the social studies teacher is having a hard time, the social studies teacher should call, not
necessarily the cluster leader. I think when it gets to the level of suspension, it probably should be [the administration] and not a cluster leader. I think that there are definite things that we need to reassess right now.

The lack of streamlined responsibility was brought up often by teachers, even when speaking about positive communication and the lack of time they have to call the number of students they serve. However, one cluster leader has created systems of streamlined communication. This cluster leader is diligent in finding the correct contact information and having teachers follow up with phone calls. After the cluster leader or a teacher in that cluster makes contact with a parent, the information is properly disseminated to the entire cluster through email or personal contact. However, since this is not a school-wide expectation, in other clusters, the culture around parent communication currently seems to be one of inconvenience and misunderstanding without clearly defined roles.

Even for positive contact, consistent check-ins, or for school-wide events, there are not clearly defined systematic expectations or protocols. In addition, responsibility is not properly disseminated to create a more convenient and manageable set of families that each staff member is responsible to contact. However, several educators admitted that when there is a behavior problem or a severe academic issue, the staff is expected to make contact immediately. A few teachers also spoke of written negative reports (such as warning notices, summer school notifications and the report cards themselves) as their most consistent form of communication. However, regular negative contact, especially without personal contact, can have a detrimental impact on the families’ perception of the school and of the staff’s priorities. Without the staff communicating positive aspects of the child, parents may not feel that the personnel cares for their child or even knows them individually. The individual knowledge and attention is an
important aspect of parents’ willingness to get involved (Comer, 1989; Epstein, 1985; Epstein, 2005a; Kratzer, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Having spent two years with this school community, I believe that the staff focus is on individual student success. However, their daily energy is put into their work with students, without bringing parents into the conversation to partner together. As a result, their work is diluted after school hours.

*Systematic expectations of school personnel lacking.*

The data sources reveal that the lack of systematic routines and expectations at this school are a factor contributing to the low levels of parent involvement at the Revere. Within the lack of systematic expectations theme, there are four components. First, as discussed above, consistent forms of regular communication are lacking. Without families receiving clear demands and invitations for parent participation, it is difficult to know that the school expects families to guide this age group in their studies and social networks after school hours (Comer & Hanes, 1991; Epstein, 2005a; Epstein, 2007; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Ruthrерford & Billig, 1995; Sanders, 1999). In addition, if parents never receive positive feedback regarding their individual child, it is hard for them to know the school’s focus and goals on the students (Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007; Kratzer, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Brenna spoke about her experience with this lack of consistent positive communication in the school as a teacher with administrative duties.

And I was actually just talking to a parent. And, um, she was like, well I haven't heard from anyone, so I just assumed everything was going well. And I said, that is our fault. She is a straight A student, everything is going well, and so often times we don't contact those parents.
Even highly involved parents feel a gap in communication. There is a core group of parents who attended every parent council meeting and most school council meetings for the two years I worked with this school community. They are well informed about the programs, field trips, speakers, award systems, etc. But they all often spoke at meetings about wishing that every parent knew the positive things happening at this school daily so that families’ images of the school would change and more parents might want to be more involved.

Parents may want to be more involved, but do not know that the school needs or desires their participation because of the lack of consistent communication. Therefore, a second consistent procedure lacking is the regular occurrence of events with positive associations. Relationships are best built through events that are focused on student accomplishment (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Decker, Decker & Brown, 2007; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Sanders, 1999). A couple of the teachers and administrators proposed during their interviews that open houses could be used more effectively to showcase the talents of students. Without the draw of their students performing and more informal events, parents may remain intimidated to attend the school. Without attending the school, they will remain unaware of school expectations, curriculum and resources available to help them advocate for their child’s education.

When held, participants felt these events need to be publicized to parents clearly. As reliable forms of contact are developed, school personnel still need to keep multiple families’ needs in mind. Ideas such as a website, more consistent phone calls home and a regular newsletter were all explored throughout this study. Although the staff is willing to try various forms of communication, the lack of consistency across the school is clearly an issue. Therefore, a major goal for this school is establishing consistent communication routines that parents can
come to expect. Parents spoke at meetings about a consistent form of communication they can look for and come to expect. Through consistent communication and positive events, families are drawn to the school more frequently. But too often, even when there is a positive event, there is no clear delineation of responsibility to recruit or attract parents to remain active.

Therefore a third systematic approach is in the responsibility to recruit and remind parents how necessary they are in their children’s education. Olivia also described the lack of clarification about whose responsibility it is to reach out to parents more. “Unfortunately, well, we have the parent council, but um, I don't know if it is the responsibility of the school or the other parents to get the word out to other parents that it is important to come and participate.”

Parents must regularly hear the importance of their participation or they will not remain consistently active, nor will they fulfill their responsibilities effectively (Epstein, 1985; Griffith, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Burow, 1995, McDermott & Rothberg, 2000).

As a result, a fourth deficiency in systematic expectations relates to the message sent to parents about the long-term goals for students. Parents felt that when families only hear about behavior issues or academic failings, or do not receive contact from teachers at all, there is no clear message sent home about the overarching vision this school has for students. The Revere uses a national program that focuses on college readiness and motivation by not only engaging students in the academic subjects, but also by concentrating on study skills, organization and goal setting. This program also brings in individual tutors, speakers from the community, and helps students to visualize and feel that college is attainable for them. But without sharing this long-term vision or involving parents in the short-term goals, there is no united message between home and school. Kerri, an administrator, spoke about the issue of the message currently relayed to parents.
But I think a lot of parents feel that the main focus is getting kids through MCAS
and a part of that is just because we offer just math, English, social studies and
science, you know, we don't have the arts. There are a couple of productions
during the year where parents are invited to come, um, but we want them to
know that we are trying to educate the whole child... You know, we want
[students] to start to think about careers, we want them to start thinking about
high school, we want them to start thinking about more than just immediate
needs and that [parents] could help us do that. So, you know, again, it would
mean much more communication with them than we do right now.

For parents to understand the school’s long-term vision for their children teachers must share
with parents the high academic expectations and how much their participation matters in the
scheme of their child’s education. Kerri stated the clarity and frequency with which this must occur: “I think if we were to state really clearly, you know and how they can help us, then, at
least some, if they heard it often enough, would say, okay, then I think I can try it, I guess I will
stick my toe in this.”

Similarly, Beth, a teacher, referred to all the time the administration spends in individual
classrooms discussing report cards and the importance of academics in this school, but this same
time is not spent with families allowing all adults to support this work with students.

I think its been helpful this year, we have tried giving out warning notices and
report cards, not just sending them home or just handing them out quickly. But
really taking a break in the day and having the principal and vice principal hand
them out personally. And I think that is great because the kids realize how
important it is, but then there is also a little piece missing there with the parents
because some of the kids still go home and still don't show [the report card to their parents]. And I think we started off on the right path, but there needs to be something more, something else, and I am not really sure what it is, but something added. Something added to that to pull the parents in too.

Another missed opportunity to connect parents with academics is the high school fair for the eighth grade students. Kerri spoke about how this is offered during the day and only students attend. However, if it was a night event that both parents and students could attend, parents may feel more included in the academic aspect of their child’s schooling. Schools must partner with the home to accomplish the overarching mission of education. The middle school grades are transitional years for individual character growth and academic preparation for high school, which sets students up for college (Wimberly & Noeth, 2002). Parents must gain consistent messages and clear ways to participate or the level of parent participation will remain minimal (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007). However, implementing these procedures, expectations and routines is difficult, because to do so would add even more responsibility to staff with already overloaded schedules.

*Time, timing and scheduling of the school.*

The amount of time all parties have to work with one another is limited by the constraints of everyday schedules. Participants spoke of the combination of parent work schedules with the odd hours of school as not conducive to parent-teacher appointments. In addition with both parents and school staff schedules overloaded with responsibilities, it is hard for any stakeholder group to be depended upon to plan informal events and lead personal contact. There is no one person advocating for or leading the creation of these partnerships. Participants mentioned having a point person or paid coordinator whose job it was to establish the expectations, carry
out training and then set up protocols for both communication and events. They could lead the school personnel in making personal phone calls, sending out reminders, initiating events and keeping the focus on the value in parent partnerships. Without a person to keep the focus on including parents in these important conversations about their child’s education, the concentration gets lost in daily obligations. Nathan, a teacher, spoke of this issue as it relates to decreasing other issues dealt with daily.

I think we all get caught up in just the daily grind of being in the school. And, kind of parents, just kind of take a back seat. The whole parent collaboration just takes a back seat because we have much bigger issues to work on, even though, it is a big issue. I actually think that would solve a lot of other issues we are working on.

The school personnel spoke often about all the time spent on behavior and academic issues with students, rather than on the students achieving at high levels. However, if the school truly partnered with families, allowed them to feel part of the school community and their child’s education, the parental participation at home may be the focus that students need to also be productive in school. The proactive time spent with families could lessen the amount of necessary reactive time spent on extreme cases. The paid coordinator position however, should be accompanied by a caution that in order for the whole school culture to shift toward valuing parent partnerships, clear procedures, expectations and roles must still be established among all staff and not just the sole responsibility of one person.

From these school factor findings, there is a great need for the school to put more time and energy into the parent population. There seems to be a direct correlation between the
school’s connection with parents and the current state of parent participation. In addition to the school itself, the district sets the tone and provides expectations for parent involvement.

District Factors

Just as the school has structures and culture around the value placed on home-school partnerships, the district also has a large influence on school and parental expectations. It also puts structures in place to involve families in the education process. There are six aspects of the districts’ contribution to the current state of home-school partnerships: district structure does not create neighborhood schools; school hours are not conducive for parents’ schedules; the district is not always positive about middle schools; curriculum and budget are established for schools; parent councils are intimidating at schools; information about schools not disseminated consistently and in multiple forms. These factors are particular to this individual district and therefore are not shared in the existing literature.

The district structure does not create neighborhood schools.

The Roslyn Public School District has a long tradition of busing students to various neighborhoods within established zones in order for families to have choices when it comes to their child’s schooling. While choice may seem ideal to promoting parent involvement, the distance this creates between home and school, both literally and figuratively, is a challenge. When schools are not in the neighborhood, not only is there physical distance, but families, community members and community businesses may not feel connected to the school without knowing the families of the children. All participants spoke of the distance as a factor limiting more parent involvement and attendance at the school. Another factor that exacerbates the distance between home and school is the school’s hours.
School hours are not conducive for parents’ schedules.

With students attending school from 7:20am until 1:30pm, many parents use the school buses or public transportation since these school hours do not coincide with their work hours. Therefore, many parents are unfamiliar with the school and may not know where it is located. In addition, with teachers’ work hours from 7:00am until 1:45pm, many parents are unable to make conferences during these hours. Even more of a factor than parents’ lack of familiarity with the school or inability to meet with the teachers during school hours is that parents are not home when the child is home in the afternoon. Parents are then less available to help with homework or even to simply establish homework routines. As a result, the long hours a child is self-sufficient after school can allow for them to make choices that may not be safe or healthy.

The district based school hours on the busing zones and therefore set these unusual school hours. There are two different start and end times for schools throughout the district so that the same buses can be used twice daily. When parents apply for their top three middle school choices, they may apply to schools strictly based on times that coincide with their own work schedules and therefore may choose other middle schools that have the late start and end times. As a result, parents are enrolling their children in the Revere school based on its hours, rather than on its mission for academic excellence. Another contributing factor limiting parents’ pride in their children’s schools are the notorious negative reputations of the middle schools in Roslyn.

The district is not always positive about middle schools.

Throughout interviews, the negative reputations of the middle schools in the Roslyn district were brought up frequently. These reputations were established regarding both the academic standards and the behavior issues. This reputation is known among community members and businesses. The administration of the Revere school during informal conversations
shared that the Revere was only one of three middle schools in the city whose local businesses did not shut down for the dismissal hour of the nearby middle school because of the chaos with students. The reputation of middle schools is also a concern for many parents. During interviews and meetings parents spoke about the amount of negative information heard regarding parents’ perceptions of the school, which may also prevent parents from wanting to get involved.

The administration shared the idea of getting the word out to families about the quality of the Revere to break these rumors. Brian spoke particularly of not only the school’s reputation, but also of the district’s promotion of the recent positive changes in middle schools to begin to change the perceptions that currently exist. Positive public relations are needed to change the long-established reputations of the middle schools in the district. Fear of the unknown is a factor that may prevent some parents from getting more involved and the district contributes to this effect on home-school relationships. In order for true partnerships to be formed and parents’ perceptions changed, parents need to feel that their contribution is valued.

*Curriculum and budget are established for schools.*

By the time parents get to middle school, they may have already tried to get involved at the elementary school level in parent councils, school councils or city-wide committees. Once they have had the experience of set curriculums and budgets in which they have no real decision-making voice and limited potential for contribution, parents may no longer attempt involvement. Once it is established that parents have no authority or even influence over budgets or curriculum, it may seem a moot point to attempt involvement. During interviews, teachers validated this point. One teacher stated that despite district-set decisions, schools could empower parents through contributions about how curriculum or budgets are disseminated in the school.
Parents do have this opportunity through school and parent councils. However, throughout interviews and council meetings it became clear how intimidating these groups are for parents.

*Parent councils are intimidating at schools.*

In the Roslyn Public Schools, the parent group is called the school parent council (SPC), which works to fundraise for the school, plan events, and serve as a group in which parents can voice their opinion and/or concerns regarding the school. There is also the advisory group to the administration, called the school site council (SSC) and this group serves as a sounding board to the principal regarding academic programs, budgets, hiring, and other decisions that may require the administration to enact change in the school. These two groups are designed to give parents a voice and allow them to contribute to the overarching education within the school. However, participants agree that just the names themselves are intimidating to parents. In addition, the first time these groups present themselves to the parent population is at the first open house, since the district requires elections of board members by an established date. This process was described as formalized and uninviting to new families. Rather than just having parents from past years elect new board members in the spring to prepare for the fall, the group cannot begin until mid to late September due to the elections of the executive board positions. This delay is a time gap in recruitment as well as establishing meetings, events and fundraising for the year, which could be established and communicated during the summer to new families. Brian, an administrator, also identified this factor as a district issue.

I think Roslyn has made the School Parent Council seem like a scary place. It is not the PTA, it is the School Parent Council, and it feels like it is going to be a lot of work, so parents don't join because they are afraid they are going to have to do...
57 things. I think that Roslyn should call it a PTA or PTO. I think that feels a lot less intimidating than SPC. With less intimidating committees for parents to join, there may be higher attendance. More approachable committees could lead to more parents having the information they need to support their own child’s education and contribute to the overall school standards.

Information about schools not disseminated consistently and in multiple forms.

Without information, parents cannot be expected to attend events, know what is expected of them or get involved in the school in appropriate ways. With such a diverse parent population, the communication must be disseminated both clearly and consistently, but also in a variety of ways that reaches all families. Brian spoke of this being a key district factor. “I think in Roslyn, what is critical, because the schools draw from such a large geographic area, is making multiple, making information available in multiple ways.” Kerri also spoke of parents needing the consistent reassurance that their involvement matters and access to clear forms of participation that are appropriate and meaningful from the district.

Because of the technology available today, families that do not have access at home can gain access through public libraries or work. It should be easier for families and school personnel to communicate via the Internet. Having established and updated websites would give parents insight into resources so that they can make informed decisions. The district can contribute to this form of communication and assist schools in keeping their families informed. The district could also provide translation services for school documents to be made available in multiple languages. Setting the expectations that families matter in the educational process must not only be a school or district expectation, but most importantly, a societal value.
Societal Factors

Participants in this study also reflected deeply on societal factors. Participants felt that beyond the school system in general, the way society is set up now has facilitated a loss of traditional family values. Due to tough economic times, parents are forced to put in long work hours and less time at home. There is an overall loss of parental involvement in children’s lives today. Since this is such a current topic, particular to the way parents feel in this city right now, the literature reviewed in chapter two does not reflect the particular issues in this study.

Many parents and staff reflected on the long work hours and lack of supervision at home. Edward, a parent, spoke of this issue beyond just academic support for students.

Because of the way society is right now, it is getting worse. And you know, parents, even life itself with no parent involvement, it is so hard. Can you imagine how that would be? So, life itself, we always try to get involved. You know, we try to get her prepared for life. Because right now, everything is good, we are paying for the bills, doing this, and doing that, you know, but then there is going to come to a point in life where you are going to have these responsibilities and you have to be ready for that.

Without parents guiding their children, there is a lack of education that goes beyond content areas. Parents are the primary educators of social skills and have the ability to expose students to a variety of areas in which students may find life-long interests, goals or motivations.

Parents’ lack of guidance relates to the fact that as a society we do not have strong expectations or even enough values around supporting parenting. Participants reflected that the value of supporting parents in the endeavor of raising a family is not strong enough as evidenced by: many employers not allowing parents to leave work for school-related events or meetings;
the lack of quality affordable childcare for parents to obtain and keep jobs that will sustain their families; and the absence of enough government subsidized money for single parents. Giving parents more economical options and flexibility in the workplace may encourage more involvement in the education of our youth and future workforce.

In addition to creating a positive culture around family values, participants felt the need to set the tone for families by enacting stronger parenting mandates around their involvement at their children’s schools, especially in underprivileged neighborhoods where students need high standards in education. Stronger educational laws could set the tone for both child and parent attendance, and the value that is placed on education in our country. Edward stated:

I think parents should be required to do something more upon enlisting a child in a public school. There should be some kind of requirements where you have to go to open houses and you have to be able to teach them, and you have to be able to do this. I think it should be something that they have to do, not just sign a kid up for school and send them off everyday.

If our federal laws are going to continue to raise the bar of expectations for students and teachers based on standardized testing and accountability, then parents may also need to be included in these higher standards and responsibility as the primary educators of our youth. Brian, an administrator, discussed the state’s responsibility to set the tone with laws regarding education:

And just the fact that it is okay in Massachusetts for a 16-year-old to drop out.

That law should absolutely change, it should be illegal to drop out before you are 18. You can't drop out until you can vote. And I think that, you know, that is something that structurally in the state would send a message loud and clear. You know, the law tells you what is important.
In addition there is a need in our society today for institutions of education to break the cycle of disempowerment for our low socio-economic families. The urban power struggles in educational institutions are perpetuated by the lack of voice given to families and the unwelcome message regularly sent. Brian spoke of the policies and procedures in many large, urban public schools that perpetuate urban disempowerment.

There are occasions, few and far between, where you have to say, this parent or this family member may never step foot on this property again. But in nine years as an administrator in Roslyn, I have used it once. And, you know, I do think that is something that is attributable to urban schools, my only experience in urban schools, large urban schools at that. But, I don't know if this happens in suburban schools or rural schools, but too often, urban schools are quick to say, get out to a parent. And that what does that do? It creates resentment, a resentment that is felt by the kid and then the cycle just continues.

Parents also spoke directly of this resentment. Denise explained her frustrations with urban school systems in low-income neighborhoods regarding the lack of high academic standards and disciplined, social skills in schools for diverse, urban populations.

In having a more comprehensive and challenging curriculum. Parents are interested in having their kids challenged and in learning new things that is engaging. That would be the first thing that I would advocate with parents for. It is one, befriending them to come and having these sessions just to have, just to begin brainstorming around how can we make the school or even the public system to go more on par with the private one. And that goes back to curriculum.
But parents’ lack of voice in these matters continues to contribute to their minimal initiative and involvement in raising the standards. The cycle of disempowerment is furthered by the deficiency of extra-curricular and enrichment activities available for students in these neighborhoods. With parents who work long hours, students should be engaged in afterschool programs or extended days at school. Without these opportunities or resources, students continue to fall behind their peers during the time outside of school. School systems or social service agencies must receive the funding and resources to help parents who work long hours. In our society today, the lack of support for parents in raising their children makes it difficult for parents to participate fully due to long work hours, economic struggles, lack of transportation and time, and intimidation by school institutions.

Relational Aspect of Factors

It is important to note that societal and district factors have an obvious umbrella effect on the choices that schools make to involve parents and parents’ participation in their children’s education. However, the relational contexts of each of these sets of factors is exactly what makes this research question not only essential in the work of schools and the future of families in our society, but also what makes it so difficult to give an all-encompassing answer on how to create effective home-school partnerships. In looking at parent factors, it is impossible to determine all aspects of the pieces affecting parents’ choices because of the major factor: their relationship with their child. In analyzing the school factors, it is difficult to determine the exact initiation and responsiveness of school personnel based on the varied connections with a diverse set of families and values. Therefore, research question three uses the lens of the sociocultural theory to attempt to tease out the culture and social structures in place to determine where convergences and divergences contribute to or prevent more effective home-school partnerships.
Analysis of Parent Involvement through Sociocultural Theory

Research question three is evaluated through the framework of the sociocultural theory, which analyzes the cultural stance of individuals, stakeholder groups and the school community at large versus social structures in place (or not) at the school (Geertz, 1973). This means that the values and beliefs, which create the “culture” of the school, are compared with the actions and behaviors, which are supported by social structures. The difficult aspect of analyzing culture is that it is socially constructed, both by the creation of individuals and through the reinforcement of societal contexts that predispose these individual beliefs. Culture is not considered neutral (Gee, 1990) and often found to be predictive in nature (Geertz, 1973). Work by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) depicts how deeply rooted individual’s values are within the historical, contextual and cultural contexts. Similarly, work by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and Hoover-Dempsey, et al (2005) find that parents’ choices to get involved in their child’s education are socially constructed through both current experiences of social networks and contexts, but more highly influenced by their inherited predispositions of their own parents, and their personal autobiographical experiences in school.

In particular, the analysis will include a comparison of the participants’ culture versus the social structures in place. This will be used on two levels: The first is to compare the dominant culture represented by the school with the non-dominant culture of the families (Gee, 1990; Lareau, 2003; Mehan, 2008). The second level is evaluating the culture already embedded within the school. The latter often reflects an embedded culture that individuals do not think about the values and beliefs because they are so deeply engrained (Sarason, 1971). Through the multiple levels of comparison, the collaboration of the community are evaluated as well as the ethical considerations of the schools’ responsibility to educate non-dominant families and assist in the
navigation of the education system as a whole, are evaluated. (Saukko, In Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The analysis includes two broader sections: first, analysis using sociocultural theory, the features and levels discussed above; second, analysis of the data that was found to go beyond sociocultural theory.

**Sociocultural Theory**

Using sociocultural theory to analyze findings, the cultures of individuals, representing dominant and non-dominant cultures at this school are compared. This data reveals that when the school personnel and parents match their own individual beliefs to what they are actually doing to work with one another, there is a best-case scenario result: parents have initiated contact, expressed their support and placed great value on education. Teachers have responded with consistent contact for both positive and negative communication purposes. Parents have then responded to both scenarios and attended the school events and meetings regularly. Therefore, conditions are created to enhance the chances the child remains positively focused, both academically and socially.

For the school personnel, some of the individuals who are matching their beliefs, include: the school personnel following through with the open door policy and welcoming parents whenever they attend the school; contacting parents to get involved when a student is having an academic or discipline issue; contacting parents when students turnaround negative situations; attempting to use all-calls more consistently for parent attendance at events; the cluster team who is following their cluster leaders model and experiencing that parent contact makes a difference.

For the parents, some individual beliefs that are matching behaviors include: initiating contact with the staff to let them know parents are involved; keeping contact information up to date at the school; attending events the school offers or checking in with teachers regularly;
creating routines and structures at home that support student homework; contacting the teacher when there is an issue at home; remaining vigilant regarding their child’s social interactions; volunteering to help at an event and/or attending council meetings consistently.

While the small percentage of families and school personnel working consistently towards accomplishing these relationships prove that these partnerships are possible, it is not yet the norm at this school. Therefore, explored next is the common occurrence of both staff and parents falling into the prevailing school culture patterns. This includes a culture of overbearing dominant values, which do not always reflect the beliefs of the non-dominant families.

*Dominant vs. non-dominant cultures.*

The dominant cultural values of middle class America seem to dominate the school personnel’s viewpoint of parent involvement. There are underlying assumptions for what parents should do to get involved at the school, such as serve on councils, attend open houses and lead fundraising initiatives, without accounting for non-dominant families’ beliefs regarding their role. There are a set of institutionalized events offered which may not appeal to the majority families: one open house at the start of the school year where families are introduced to staff in a large setting and then proceed to classrooms to learn about the curriculum; and two report card open houses, which allow parents an allotment of approximately 15 minutes twice a year to speak with their child’s teacher (not necessarily including the team of teachers the child sees daily, but just the homeroom teacher). There are also two types of events that draw the largest crowds: the performance shows, which include one holiday singing concert and one multicultural show where students perform in a variety of ways; and the honor roll ceremonies in which students with high academic performance are honored. However, this pattern of attendance has not reflected change in the format of open houses to attract more families. With a school so
focused on raising academic achievement, school personnel should be working hard to use parents as a catalyst to push their children to higher levels. The dominant school institutional values remain stagnant in ways in which these events have always been done. I believe that through more informal events with positive associations for parents, staff may have more opportunities to involve parents in the academic aspects based on increased comfort levels.

The trust that can be formed comes with building relationships over time. Based on Bryk & Schneider’s (2002) relational trust work, all the reforms put into place in low-income, urban schools will not matter without social trust formed among teachers and parents, which yields trust among students and staff. This includes genuine dialogue and the appreciation of differing viewpoints. In this particular setting the two issues that Bryk and Schneider (2002) discuss are present: cultural differences between school personnel and parents; and the uneven power relations based on staff’s professionalism in the field of education versus parents of various backgrounds. Based on these research findings, social trust as a resource at this school is missing. Students are not benefiting from the transfer of adult trust into their own relations with staff. I believe this is an impediment to raise student achievement.

During the 15 months I worked at the Revere, the school never held professional development around parent involvement, or cultural sensitivity and working with diverse cultures. Without making this collaboration a priority or even a reality in the school, norms cannot be established around building social trust. Because of this insensitivity to non-dominant values, communication remains formal or non-existent and cannot completely focus on the individual child. But these relationships are essential for adolescent students to perceive as they are forming their identities. Another dominant cultural value is based on the school focusing their energy into raising student standardized test scores and improving teacher professional
development to prepare students, but simultaneously leaving aside a more non-dominant value of forming social trust. Olivia spoke of the school personnel’s focus of the school on students.

Where the school itself, and again from the administration on down, is so focused on getting the kids to do what they need to do and it’s their focus on the kids. And so, the parents are...unless you are there and you are on top of things, you are there to hear what is happening in the school, you are left out. But their main concern is the children.

This mother is absolutely correct in the focus this staff has on their students’ achievement. However, the school’s work will be in vain if they do not connect with families to build trusting relationships in which parents then encourage their students to excel in dominant culture institutions, namely the levels of the educational system. Only when parents trust the institution of education, perceive its attainability and benefit for their child, will they encourage and motivate their students to respect and work hard in schools.

From the data, it is clear that the individual beliefs around home-school partnerships are overshadowed by prevailing already established cultures. In other words, the long-time school culture that has been developed, which allows the existing status quo, is overtaking individual’s beliefs about the importance of family involvement in children’s education. These inconsistencies were clear with both school personnel and with parent groups during interviews through frequent self-contradictory statements made throughout interviews. These paradoxes are presented below as the evidence that individual values are overcome by school culture and therefore not carried out through social structures put in place at the school.
School paradoxes.

The school personnel made statements, paradoxical in nature, which depict their misunderstanding of non-dominant family values. At times, individuals seemed to admit to their own inconsistencies, yet at other times, seemed to be unaware of disconnects between their statements and their own actions. This lack of awareness reflects how deeply rooted personal actions are within the school culture.

The first paradox involves the school personnel’s acknowledgement of their experience with this age group, yet not offering their knowledge and understanding to parents, who may be experiencing the adolescent age group for the first time. Multiple staff members spoke of parents needing direction based on the varying needs of children within this difficult age group, yet the school does not provide any directive guidance or support groups for parents. In working with this age group, parents can feel powerless in terms of maintaining a relationship and authoritative control. The powerlessness that parents may feel with their own children is then furthered by the school system through the amount of decisions that are already made.

The second paradox involves the staff wanting parents to attend council meetings and give their input, yet parents’ knowledge that most district and school decisions are already established. It is common knowledge that curriculum and budgets are set from above within large school systems such as the Roslyn Public Schools. Yet, throughout interviews, school personnel continuously spoke of not understanding why parents do not participate in committees such as school council in order to give input and ideas. For parents who have attended meetings, there is knowledge that parents will be told what is happening, but not really have a say in enacting change. For parents already intimidated by councils, this may further enforce their feelings of not belonging. For families experiencing financial difficulties, transportation issues,
long work hours and unique family structures, time is limited and not wasted in places where their opinions are not valued. Beth, a teacher, brought up this same issue of expecting parents to voice opinions at parent council meetings, yet the limitations to their input.

In terms of curriculum, I think that is something that could be brought up at parent council and then it can be, kind of similar to what you do, a kind of liaison that brings those ideas...but then you don't want to open a can of worms and say, what do you think your kid should be taught because we are all so constrained by so many things. So I think opening it up too much is asking a lot.

This statement was similarly made in each school personnel’s interview: we want parents to come, but do not want them to expect to be part of decision-making. Similar to their possible negative experiences of being on committees at school, many parents have had frequent exposure to negative contact with staff on a regular basis.

Therefore, the third paradox involves the consistent negative contact with families, yet school personnel being shocked that parents are not communicating more frequently with staff. Throughout all interviews with school personnel, it became clear that the one consistent element throughout the school is the negative communication. Kate, a teacher, spoke of the school philosophy to call immediately for negative issues. “I think the school actually does a really good job of trying to reach out to parents. Um most of us, have this theory of get involved early, call parents early in the year if you have a problem.” Even without a pre-existing relationship with parents, teachers’ first contact, and oftentimes the consistent contact, is negative. That can become a daunting experience for a parent. Yet, later in the interview, Kate also spoke of how parents are not at the school often enough, even for positive events, and how hard that can be for the student who does not have the positive reinforcement. “The more these kids, the more
positive reinforcement these kids get, the better off they are. They have enough negative from everywhere.” This is a hypocritical message to send to parents: They are expected to attend events and communicate regularly with staff, yet their only other consistent form of communication from the school personnel is negative.

The issue around positive communication was raised frequently throughout this study as a motivation for both students in their studies and for parents to feel involved. With neither parents nor teachers taking this initiative for more frequent informal, positive communication, there is no genuine relationship being formed by adults for the sake of student achievement. Liz, a teacher, reflected on this satisfaction with the status quo.

But you know a student who maintains their grades and is doing well there really is not a lot of parent involvement. It would be nice to meet them, but it’s almost like the motto, if it is not broken, then you don't have to fix it.

With students doing well and adults in contact with one another, together stakeholders could push students further. Without contact between adults that has a positive undertone, students may not perceive the adult genuineness of uniting for the child’s success.

While the negative contact is detrimental itself, the real paradoxical nature of these statements comes from the same school personnel questioning and not understanding the lack of parent involvement. It seems evident that a major disconnect exists between the school staff’s desire for the parents to participate and the realization that the institutional values do not account for non-dominant families’ perceptions. Todd, a teacher with administrative duties, spoke consistently about all the negative contact he makes with parents regarding behavior and grades, yet stated outright that he did not understand why parents were resistant to the school.
I just can't understand why we get some of the push back that we do regarding
how we go about things here. Um, some parents don't think we have the best
interest of the child. Um, in mind, when we make certain decisions. Um, they
think that we are doing something wrong which is leading to the child's behavior.

With all negative contact, it is hard to understand why a parent would not see the school as
confrontational. At this level of schooling, parents may have experienced this type of
communication for up to six years. It seems possible that their lack of involvement may really
just be a sign of surrender. Many school personnel could not understand why parents were not
doing more to raise grades. But if their experience to this point has been that of their child failing
and the school not effectively helping to change that outcome, their lack of participation, which
is taken as indifference, may instead just be exhaustion and confusion.

A fourth paradox is that there is a contradiction between the claims of levels of
accessibility of the staff and the realities. Brenna, a teacher with administrative duties, spoke
directly of teachers’ schedules:

Well obviously like I said, ideally, we would be more open to the parents. We sit
there and we say we are here. No we are not, 2 o'clock comes and this place is a
ghost town. People have other things. People take courses and people have
families. I know for me, I have to be out of the building by 2:25 or my daughter is
going to be waiting at her school by herself. So, there are certain things that we
say, yeah, yeah, yeah, but in reality, no.

Therefore, while teachers may claim to be accessible, they are really only available during the
limited time they are at the school. I observed several teachers who use their preparation time
during the school day to make phone calls, but who do not take calls home with them. I also
observed teachers completing their end of the day duty coverage with their own school bag in hand ready to exit the building after all students are released. Accessibility of the staff and school can also be defined more broadly to include events and announcements from the school.

Therefore a fifth paradox is that many of the school personnel often referenced the crowds that are drawn to positive events such as the honor roll ceremony or the multicultural show, yet then followed these statements by saying that they were unsure of how to get parents to the school. Liz, a teacher, directly stated this in her interview:

Because if you look at the multicultural show, if you look at that, parents come to that, because their kid is up on stage and they are performing. So, you know, they do want to get involved or they can get involved, it’s just a matter of finding a way to get them here.

Getting parents to the school requires school-wide communication efforts that may more effectively meet a diverse set of families’ needs. Data has also shown that parents are more likely to attend events in which their child is showcased, as opposed to when they are to be spoken to by staff or even just to meet with staff directly. This is an important consideration when planning events at the school and when considering how to involve more low-income, urban parents in the academic aspects of school.

A sixth paradoxical issue is staff’s criticism of parents treating students as older than they are, yet relying on the students to communicate with home for the staff. Throughout interviews and informal conversations, the school personnel consistently spoke of parents giving over too much responsibility to their children at an age where they were not yet mature enough to handle independence. However, staff spoke of relying on students to communicate with their parents rather than making the contact themselves. Olivia, a parent, spoke of this issue.
I think that they leave it up to the children to tell the parents and [the students] don't. You know…and again, part of it is that training, but [students] are not there yet, they are still...they want to act mature, but they are not mature.

Since this staff is aware of the communication issues this age group has with their parents, and recognizes students as not necessarily organized or mature enough to remember to inform their parents of all the events or announcements from school, it seems inconsistent to place the burden on students to communicate with home.

Finally, the most glaring paradox stated by the school personnel throughout this study is their message of focusing on students, raising achievement and getting students to create and sustain long-term goals while the school also doesn’t engage parents in these same important academic conversations. By not allowing insights into the personal goals that staff has for students and creating positive experiences for families when they do attend the school, students may not be motivated to sustain their achievement once they leave the school without consistent parent support. The staff often spoke of focused, positive work with families, but also stated issues this school has with the retention of parent participation from the sixth to eighth grade. This issue may be that the school personnel do not involve parents in meaningful and positive conversations about the goals the school personnel have for their child. The staff should work toward making parents feel their time is well spent when they attend meetings or open houses. Parents must feel that their participation is valued by the school personnel and contributes to the education of their child. Without school personnel making an effort to recognize and accept non-dominant family cultures’ perspectives, trusting relationships cannot be formed.
Parent paradoxes.

Probably the most glaring paradox throughout this study is the fact that parents have proven that they can make the effort, but too often do not, even for their own child’s education, let alone the overall school community. Liz, a teacher, described one of her experiences with this issue:

And a lot of parents do drop their kids off, so they could come in and meet. It is funny too, who, I had a student whose iPod was taken and the parent was up the next day. I have never met the parent before and I have taught him for two years.

You know, so, they can come up, they can make the effort, and they just don't.

An example of the frustration regarding parents not following through is in their attendance. Just as teachers are disappointed in parent attendance at open houses, parents are dissatisfied with one another when it comes to council meetings, events and fundraisers. All five members of the parent council shared these feelings of frustration during this data collection time period in both interviews and observations of meetings.

A second aspect to the lack of parent effort is that parents will either complain about the school or state what the school should be doing, yet will not attend the meetings or be change agents for these ideas. Denise, who is not involved at the school more broadly than with issues concerning her own son, spoke often of what the parents should provide to engage students and provide more meaningful and rigorous curriculum. Yet this is one parent who spoke of not having the time to be on committees or to attend events.

I think it would just be advocates for it, and maybe if we had, if we could look at within the school, within the parent community, what do we have already that we can use, not necessarily to be paid, but to volunteer. A lot of us, my background is
in administration. You know, I can volunteer time to administrate some stuff and look at programs and what do we need and how do we manage people. Others know about art, and about style and about music. We can use that. We can use what we have in there and make it available.

As a researcher who worked closely with the school personnel and parent council, I was disappointed to hear a parent who does not get involved in any of the activities that affect the broader school community state what the school should be providing via parent resources. This parent had not offered these services before this interview and to my knowledge, never initiated any of these ideas following the interview. I believe these are the types of statements that have led to the staff’s feelings that reaching out to parents may be lost time and energy.

In addition, other parents who are already involved spoke adamantly about the need for more enriching afterschool programs that extend the day for students and keep them in a safe location. However, despite all of these values and beliefs, there are no parents currently fighting for this type of action with the school or district. While enriching activities and extended school hours are commendable ideas, families need to be the advocates and put the pressure on the district and the city to find the funding to provide these types of activities that are greatly needed for this age group. The bottom line is that the education the school provides and the social activities the parents would like the schools to provide are all for the sake of these children.

Therefore, the central paradox coming from the parent population is the criticism of the school not doing enough for students when the staff’s work is actually centered on the students. While the school has a responsibility to hold events and communicate clearly with families, parents should be seeking and demanding this information much more than they do currently.
These students are their own children. John, a parent, proposed that the staff and, in particular, the principal make personal phone calls to find out why parents are not more involved.

You know, maybe the first couple months make phone calls, remind the parents, and um, you know maybe have the principal call directly himself. I know it would be a lot of parents to call, but just to, you know get their feedback. How come they haven't come and do they want to come and support? Or what can we do to make it easier? Is it having a babysitter to babysit the kids? Just to reach out.

While personal phone calls may not be feasible, more personal outreach to gain information regarding forms of partnership from families is a possibility. If the staff and administration were to partake in this initiative, parents would have to be both willing and honest. Parents must be responsive to the school in any way that is feasible given all the factors that affect low-income, urban families today. Parents want what is best for their child: a quality education that will lead them to life success. However, families must take responsibility alongside the staff for this endeavor. The main essence of all these aspects of parent paradoxical statements is that parents must be willing to communicate and support the school to educate their children.

In spite of these paradoxical statements and actions by parents, a major aspect for their lack of initiation for the sake of their child’s education is low-income, urban families’ history of disempowerment in schools. With uneven power struggles, families may not feel they are able to enact change or advocate for their children based on their past experiences or simply their lack of experience in this area. However, since parents had an abundance of ideas regarding raising standards and conditions in schools for their children, it becomes even more imperative that school personnel reach out to empower parents in these communities and support them in their
advocacy. School personnel may be able to get more programs back into the schools such as the arts and athletics if they helped parents be the change agents for this type of work.

Ironically, just as frequently as groups made paradoxical statements regarding their own or another stakeholder groups’ efforts, they also made empathetic statements with reasoning why other groups were unable to follow through with their half of the partnership. What emerged from these reasons is a prevailing culture of rationalizations and assumptions.

*The perpetuation of a culture of assumptions.*

Both the school personnel and the parents seemed to perceive the lack of follow-through on obligations as legitimate limitations. This empathetic way of thinking at times was akin to legitimate reasoning. However, at other times these reasons seemed more like excuses for their own stakeholder group to justify their own actions based on the assumed limitations of the other. As the researcher, I realized that a cycle seemed to emerge: When parents state that teachers are overwhelmed with their caseload of students, they inadvertently gave themselves a reason not to call to check in on their own child. And when teachers say that parents are inundated at work and with family obligations, they gave themselves a reason not to call parents. Statements below are explored critically to evaluate the difference between empathetic reasoning and inadvertent excuses for themselves.

The first area is the school personnel excusing parents from getting involved at the school. School personnel often spoke during interviews about how difficult this age group is and that students pushing their parents away is a major deterrent for parents to participate. Allowing this as a reason justifies parents’ lack of involvement. However, the school personnel should be setting a tone that no matter what your kid says, it is a parent’s responsibility to act as the adult and put the child’s best interest first. This entails setting boundaries and giving kids some
independence and space, but also guiding them. By school personnel saying that kids do not want parents in their school territory, there is an underlying reason not to invite parents.

Frequently during interviews, school personnel also listed an array of contextual issues facing low-income, urban parents: cultural barriers, language barriers, long work hours, other children at home, family structures, intimidation and discomfort at the school. While these are legitimate reasons and in many cases true, not attempting to change parents’ perceptions of schools through more school personnel efforts allows the status quo of dominant values to prevail. Without the knowledge to navigate educational systems and the information regarding resources available to students, non-dominant families will continue to be unable to have the opportunity to support their child’s education. Rather than excusing parents from participating, school personnel could be seeking innovative and varied perspectives on reaching out to parents such as reformatting open houses or meeting in more convenient community locations.

Another issue that arose is the unique family structures in homes today. Staff acknowledged the difficulties parents might have in balancing all of their obligations, as a single parent, two working parents or extended family raising these adolescents. However, regardless of circumstance, it benefits students when parents have the necessary resources. As stated in the findings from research question one, the ability to navigate the school system is crucial and without social capital from other parents, families must rely on the school personnel. With school personnel allowing the same structures to exist without an increase in parent involvement, non-dominant values are ignored. Additionally, school personnel often spoke of parents’ different cultural and ethnic backgrounds negatively affecting this ability due to the fact that many did not go through the American education system themselves. This should serve as an incentive to
provide the proper information for students to succeed in middle school, high school and beyond to families without this background knowledge rather than acceptance of non-participation.

Throughout their children’s education, there should be information available to parents to help them understand the education systems at the state, district and school levels. If this information is clearly provided, then schools can legitimately have higher expectations for parent participation with their child and partnership with the school. As a country, if we are serious about raising standards for schools, teachers/children’s expectations of the parents should be lifted alongside those of the students and teachers. Parents can only be held to higher standards if the school is ready to help them clearly define their role and help them understand their involvement matters.

Shifting ideologies for parents in order to focus students requires time and energy. In speaking about all the reasons it is difficult for parents to participate, schools are then justifying their neglect in failing to reach out to parents. The most frequent interpretation by participants of this school’s shortcomings is the amount of focus they already place on students, rather than on parents. School personnel themselves rationalized their own disregard for trying to create more effective partnerships with families based on their overloaded schedules. However, many of the issues that take teachers’ time is dealing with behavior problems and reviewing material not completed at home through homework, projects and enriching activities outside of school hours. With more time proactively put into family support so that assignments and expectations are clearly set at home, important time could be regained in the classroom for curriculum.

Beth, a teacher, spoke about the idea of the school personnel educating parents as much as the staff is focused on educating students. This teacher felt that the difficulty in this
undertaking is that families who may really need the help may not attend an evening with this
type of focus.

But we have talked about having a math night or having a different night so that
parents can see how their children are being taught these lessons, so that they can
go home with some sort of frame of reference as to how to help them. But then
again, the parents who end up coming, may not necessarily have the kids that
need the help, so it is, kind of, I don't want to say useless, but you know, the
parents that we want to reach, may not be able to make it.

Throughout interviews and observations, it seems that every time a school personnel member
had an innovative idea to attract parents, they reverted back to the lack of attendance of parents
as the reason they do not attempt them. But even for families that are providing their students
with space, time and expectations for learning at home, the benefit in parents understanding the
curriculum, resources and ways to push their students further has great potential. In addition, if
this proactive culture became the norm at the Revere, parents’ attendance levels at events and
meetings might rise over time. Beth recognized the irony in her own statements. She spoke about
the need to devote the time to creating this type of culture: “I feel like we try to say that, you
know, we do [education] together [with families], that whole little spiel, but some of [the
parents] might not, you know, they kind of hear it and kind of continue on or whatever.”

The school personnel have legitimate reason to question the amount of time they can put
into parent outreach given their already overloaded schedules. However, the proactive energy
spent giving parents clear expectations and building relationships could make the difference in
allowing their classrooms to focus on curriculum, rather than behavior or missing work. In
addition, creating the school culture around this work could make the investment in home-school partnerships less daunting as it became more natural for both staff and families.

Similar to the school making excuses for families, inadvertently creating their own rationalizations for not reaching out, parents frequently excused the staff. Parents often justified busy staff schedules and educators’ focus on students as the reasons for staff to be unable to do more to promote home-school partnerships. Parents rationalized uninvolved families as the reason that the school does not adjust to the diverse population of parents and the needs of this age group of students to perceive united adults. Edward acknowledged the surrender staff make when they do not perceive effort from parents.

And you know, after a while I guess the teacher is gonna say, well, you know, I can't get a hold of the parents, they are nonexistent, and I think it goes downhill from there. There is really nothing else that they can do.

This father and his wife have done just the opposite with their own child’s education and have gotten very involved with his daughter’s teachers. But he rationalizes educators giving up on these connections with home that are necessary, especially for this age group of adolescents.

The fact that parents are not demanding new formats for meetings and events, or diverse types of contact is reflective once again of the non-dominant groups’ power struggle with dominant institutional values. Multiple meeting observations and comments during interviews with parents reflected the school’s lack of positively associated events and consistent forms of communication as their greatest concern. Grace spoke of more frequent information nights for students who transfer, as the population at the Revere is transient. This could also benefit parents who are unable to attend the initial open house.
You know for kids changing schools, they do a big program at the beginning of the year. So I think those are good. I am just not sure if they reach everybody. And of course, it’s such a big system. How can you run two or three of those a year? But it might be important to do that like two or three times a year.

This statement was rationalized by how big the system is and how hard it is to reach parents. Other similar statements were made, which also were followed with the large caseloads of students, already overloaded schedules and already uninvolved families that staff deal with as the reasons the school does no reach out more. Grace also said:

I know that teachers are doing the best that they can under the circumstances of their profession. I mean, when you are working with 25 or 30 kids, and in homeroom situations, and just the number of kids that you have to work with. It is very difficult to keep track of each and every one. And try to promote best practice with each kid and so, as a parent, I think it is important to understand what [the teacher] role is and how [students] are impacted.

In many suburban schools, where families share dominant cultural values, parents do not accept large caseloads of students as a rationale for why teachers do not keep them informed or partner with them for the best interest of the child. Rather than working more or harder, it seems that there is a great need for school personnel to work innovatively to meet the needs of families from non-dominant cultural backgrounds.

The prevailing school culture has revealed an underlying existence of excuses for and assumptions about one another to inadvertently allow stakeholder groups to rationalize their own lack of engagement in home-school partnerships. If there is one thing learned from this analysis, it is that a culture of excuses breeds allowance of non-participation. This is unacceptable from
both a moral community stance and an ethical perspective. Despite the fact that there are some very real situations at home and in schools that must be factored in when discussing home-school partnership culture, there is still a domination of overarching school values that does not accept non-dominant beliefs.

Confirming this theory is the fact that both school personnel and parents can admit what they should be doing. Throughout interviews, informal conversations and observations, school personnel spoke of the following norms that should be in place at the school for families to partner with them around their child’s achievement:

- Direct communication among adults, without a reliance on the students
- Within more consistent communication, multiple forms of communication that meet the needs of diverse families
- Consistent, focused, and positive communication that allows families to perceive the knowledge of the staff regarding their individual child
- Consistent events that highlight students and appeal to families rather than just the institutionalized events that currently exist;
- Clearly defining meaningful roles for both staff and families as the basis of the home-school partnership.

Similarly, parents stated what their own group should be doing for their part in working with the school:

- Overall, parents just need to take on the responsibility of parenting, let go of their own negative histories or experiences with schools for the sake of their own child’s future;
• Make the parent council an appealing place for parents that does not just support the school, but also supports the parents;
• Remain vigilant of their child’s academic and social life consistently
• Overall, just making their child’s education a priority in the family

Through this analysis, it is evident that sociocultural theory applies directly to this study. However, what is not as clear in the literature defining sociocultural theory is the possibility of interacting sub-cultures, which feed into one another. In this study, the two sub cultures of school personnel and parents interact with one another in a negative way to create a detrimental overarching culture of non-participation. Each of these cultures allows excuses and rationales for one another, which inadvertently give their own group reasons not to uphold partnerships. The creation of norms in this school based on the two interacting groups ultimately creates a culture of assumptions, which allow for non-participation.

Beyond Sociocultural Theory

In spite of sociocultural theory and the fact that people’ behaviors and actions are dependent upon their beliefs, there are external factors that limit an individual’s ability to act upon their beliefs. These dynamics must be considered apart from whether or not the school community is creating social structures for partnerships to exist. There are five areas that were implicitly expressed, spoken of during informal conversations or present during observations, which must be noted for the context of this study.

The first area, which affects one of the major findings concerning time constraints, is the teachers’ union’s contract restrictions. In this district, teachers’ contracts provide that there are limited amounts of time in which teachers can be asked to remain past school hours for meetings with parents. These are restricted to two nighttime open houses and one daytime open house in
which students are released early and teachers remain for the afternoon to meet with parents. Beyond these three times, teachers have to voluntarily agree to attend events or meetings. This limits the amount of work that can be done with parents, either with positive events, parent information sessions or even more frequent conferences between staff and families. As a result, administrators often feel restrained from being creative with time and events by the limits of the union. For them to do so would mean that the staff has to value building these relationships enough to want to voluntarily create parent sessions to assist parents with academic expectations and/or events where families and staff can spend time with one another for the purpose of building trust. This culture would take time and energy to build, so the buy-in by teachers must be long-term in order to give adequate time to raise expectations for home-school partnerships.

A large aspect of how teachers’ priorities and philosophies within the profession are created is through their preparation. Teacher preparation programs are a second factor that goes beyond sociocultural theory. They include both the focus of course work in the university program and teachers’ experience in the classrooms during their student teaching practicum. Combined together, the coursework and practicum not only help teachers create their own personal philosophies, but also solidify their own feelings of efficacy around areas of pedagogy, content, management and collaboration. The student teaching practicum experience has a particularly significant impact on most pre-service teachers’ beliefs. Therefore, experience in coursework as well as in the practicum experience strongly influence whether or not pre-service teachers value partnerships with families or experience the impact it can have on their classroom. One aspect unique to the middle school level is the different certification levels and practicum experiences within the same building.
The third factor is the varying certifications held by teachers at the middle school level. While sixth-grade teachers hold a teaching license of grades one through six, the seventh- and eighth-grade teachers hold a teaching license of grades seven through twelve. While the elementary certification often focuses pre-service teachers on the management and pedagogy of teaching multiple subject areas, the secondary certification focuses on content area knowledge and effective delivery. With a self-contained classroom at the elementary school level, teachers communicate with families more often due to a smaller caseload and longer time period with the child daily. With multiple classes of students for a secondary teacher, contact usually only arises if there are either behavior issues or academic struggles. These pre-service experiences and models of teacher expectations by the cooperating teacher working with the student teacher help mold the beliefs around home-school partnerships. Within a middle school building, where teachers have varying priorities, the culture around parent contact and relationships is often mixed and therefore inconsistent at best.

A fourth, further complicating factor is an inconsistent belief system within the school due to the number of demands that society already places on teachers. In addition to the content teachers are expected to include in their classes, today schools are often charged with imparting social skills, personal hygiene information, technological skills and safety, and information regarding at-risk behaviors such as drugs and alcohol. Over time, the education system has taken on the role of a social service institution rather than just that of an educational institution. The conflicting message to teachers resides in what areas to prioritize. While the school has taken on many formerly-held family roles, parents are inundated with long work hours and are often experiencing financial difficulties.
The high demands of parents set by society causes a mixed message of where time should be spent and acts as a fifth factor that goes beyond sociocultural theory. As a result of making ends meet and working multiple jobs, parents’ time spent with family has dwindled. Their decreasing amount of time spent at home and with their children in order to keep their family stable has caused strains on family relationships with their own children as well as with their children’s school. The lack of consideration about their child’s curriculum or even about their personal strengths and weaknesses has caused a gap in parent knowledge about the high standards expected in education today. Within the school systems, parents must understand the high-stakes testing and higher standards for curriculum benchmarks and report cards. For long-term career goals, it is essential that parents grasp that their children can no longer realize a career, which will sustain them economically, without a college degree. If parents do not realize that college is necessary for their child, they are less apt to push their child academically or to get involved in the school.

These five areas, which go beyond the sociocultural theory of individual or even collective values of the school community, serve as major impediments in the home-school partnerships. Individual beliefs, the larger school community culture, the empathetic reasoning for each stakeholder group and the societal aspects that go beyond sociocultural theory all affect these partnerships in a real and tangible way. Nonetheless, the findings from this study are summarized below.

Discussion of the Findings

The three research questions’ findings have a cyclical relationship in terms of the natural order with which they follow one another: appropriate parent roles at the middle school level are identified; the barriers caused by several stakeholder groups which impede the development of
more effective home-school partnerships are revealed; the two interacting sub-cultures breed non-participation based on the excuses used to form norms based on a culture of assumptions.

For research question one, the findings can be summarized by defining the role of a middle school parent through the communication he/she has with other stakeholders. This may involve multiple forms of contact, but in consistent ways that parents can come to expect. It also may entail initiating and responding to school personnel in order to form partnerships, and connecting with the child to form genuine knowledge of their peer relationships and academic work. Finally, this communication may ultimately be most effective in conveying the priority placed on student education and connecting with other adults, all in the best interest of the child.

Although the second research question addressed barriers that have been researched before, presented in this study were those that are unique to middle school, adolescent aged students. All of these factors also relate to a diverse, urban, low-income population that this school serves. More than each individual’s barriers are the interconnected nature of their factors that prevent one another from partnering. These barriers include the relationships between parents and children as well as the trust formed between school personnel and parents.

Regarding the third research question, from analysis of the data through the lens of sociocultural theory, it is clear that the overarching school community’s culture overpowers individuals’ beliefs about the importance of parent involvement at the middle school level. Paradoxical statements were found throughout interviews that depicted these disconnects between beliefs and the social structures in place at the Revere. Additionally, empathetic reasoning around the actions of the other major stakeholder group allowed for personal stakeholders’ groups to have a reason to not uphold their own role. The overall disjunction between the beliefs/values of the dominant and non-dominant cultures of the school personnel
and the parents lead to ineffective social structures to promote partnerships. The two interacting sub-cultures breed a culture of assumption through excuses, which lead to accepted norms of non-participation from both parents and staff in home-school partnerships. Finally, there are aspects that reach beyond the sociocultural theory to larger institutionalized societal factors, which overpower individual beliefs and infuse school culture.

Overall, despite the literature alluding to many of these same appropriate parent roles and factors that affect home-school partnerships, the reality is that there are unique implications for the middle school level. In addition, traditional support models do not have a broad enough definition to make them effective for the financially- and time-strapped parents with diverse family situations enrolled in schools today. The partnership approach model seems to reflect both the ideals of today’s schools, which raise standards for the whole school community, as well as to address many of the disconnects between beliefs and social structures. Through the partnership model, both school personnel and families are charged with the obligation to initiate contact and respond to one another. In both meeting at common ground and involving families in the educational process (rather than simply through fundraising and events), schools can help level the playing field by increasing parents’ access to social capital for resources and standards around parent advocacy in their children’s education. This is also based on relational trust establishment to bridge the gap between dominant and non-dominant values of stakeholder groups at this school.

Since this research is also based on an action research stance in which I intend to improve matters in this school, it is also important to discuss the findings from this standpoint. From the two years spent with this school community, I have no doubt that there is great potential for change. I believe that, given the parent population of the school and the amount of perceived
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power this faculty has, culture shifts and changes in attitudes around home-school partnerships will have to begin with the staff. This faculty must be willing to engage in some of the implication for practice below in order to create an environment in which parents feel welcome, want to attend events at the school, and recognize that, even (and perhaps especially) for children this age group, parents are immensely important in their educational career. I truly believe that if the staff were to invest itself into efforts that will attract and retain parent support, not only will their work with students during the day flourish, but the number of parents at the school will increase, thus yielding more support for fundraising and events. From there, I believe that parents will begin to initiate taking more responsibility and responding more appropriately due to the culture of partnership that has been created.

Simultaneously, I make these assertions with caution. There will probably always be a percentage of the population that does not get involved in the school, either by virtue of their life contexts or of their belief systems. However, with teachers sensing increased parent support and the middle ground parents initiating and responding more frequently, the cycle can begin where teachers reach out more frequently to promote parents to respond more effectively. Thus, parents may gain the confidence they need to advocate and initiate their own role in their children’s education. Another reservation I have is the group of institutionalized, “beyond sociocultural theory” factors that will always hinder progress, unless as a society we decide to place higher values on family life and more mandates aimed at raising the standards for parents alongside those of our students and teachers. No matter how deep the beliefs of individuals and even of school communities are in the power of home-school partnerships, without support for families in the workplace, relationships between home and school may not have the time to be developed.
Limitations of the Study

Just as there are institutionalized restrictions on education, there are also limits to this research itself. Several limitations within this study are the nature of the sample, the data source materials, validity issues and the potential for researcher bias. The first and most obvious limitation is that this study is based on a single case study of one low-income, urban middle school. Therefore the ability to generalize based on my findings is limited. However, focusing on one school, four different adult stakeholder groups and three data sources, allowed me to collect richer data based on multiple sources. In addition, my familiarity with this staff and parent population allowed me access and insights that corroborated ideas emerging from the data.

However, the nature of the sample was also limited. Although through observations and analysis of artifacts, I was able to include the perspectives and experiences of many more participants, the preponderance of the data was based on the interviews of 16 primary participants. Through my most core group of contacts, I was able to define a cross section of roles that the various adults play in this school community in terms of grade level, subject area, a range of perspectives and dedication to home-school relationships. However, 16 participants cannot possibly accurately represent the approximately 500 families at the school or the 60 staff members. In addition, by removing the special education and Vietnamese cluster, two major stakeholder groups’ perspectives were eliminated. However, the objective of this research was to look at the regular education, middle ground group of parents who may be conflicted or unsure about their involvement. This group may not already have set beliefs around their own involvement and may be influenced by school personnel. In addition, while some of this group may believe their participation is important, they may not understand how to become involved effectively at the middle school level. Since the age of the students themselves proved to be
significant in all findings, it may have been helpful to learn about the students’ perspectives on this topic through the interviewing process or even through observations of students with their parents at events such as open houses or the multicultural show. However, since adults are the primary stakeholders charged with creating and sustaining these relationships, it seemed more efficient and useful to gain their perspectives on this sparsely-researched topic of specific parent roles at the middle school level. Finally, it is important to note that all of this research is based on individual’s perspectives, feelings, beliefs and assumptions regarding their own role and what they perceive others’ responsibilities to be.

Next, it is important to note that although the three data sources yield rich information and allow for multiple angles to corroborate data findings, there are limits as to how much each source can provide. Interviews proved to be the richest data and truly exposed not only individual values, but also the culture of the school community. However, interviews are also limited in that the participants may try to please the researcher or to respond in ways that they believe may show them in a favorable light. The next most influential data source on these findings was the observations. These not only allowed me to see the individual’s beliefs in action, but also to critically compare individuals’ and the school communities’ theoretical values versus their very real behavior. However, observations mainly consisted of events at the school where I was previously a working and active member. Although I was able to take a less active role during the formal research period, I often found myself participating in conversations or sharing ideas from past experiences. While this gave me a very intimate position within these events and meetings, the majority of my experience was not used to impartially observe in the pure sense of the word. Finally, the artifacts from the school and district level used for analysis were more revealing in terms of missing information than for what was actually included. These
sources ranged from the absence of documents sent home regularly by either the school or by the district other than warning notices, suspension hearing notices and report cards. Translated documents at the school level were also in short supply. Many district information pamphlets or newsletters are translated, but are sent home infrequently. This idea of dominant cultural values of the school not considering the non-dominant cultures of families adds to pre-existing urban power struggles. Finally, although the documents and their omissions were essential for me to consider in this study, they were created for purposes other than research and therefore must be analyzed with caution.

A third potential area of limitation involves validity and reliability. All precautions were taken to ensure the most internally and externally valid results. Within qualitative research, the questions must be asked: As a researcher, did I draw meaningful and justifiable inferences from the data sources? And, were plausible explanations regarding perceptions drawn from the participants? In reviewing the realist approach to validity, steps were taken to ensure factual accuracy through both my own transcription of interviews and the meticulous field notes recorded throughout this study. In addition, due to the 15 months prior to this study that I spent at this school and the data I collected over three months, the interpretations presented through the interactions and relationships between data sources limit the potential issues surrounding interpretive validity.

With an action research stance intended to improve the situation at this school, close scrutiny of the comparison between beliefs and social structures allow a connection of the data findings to the theoretical frameworks. One of the goals of research is to produce findings that can be used. For this particular study, my goal was to ensure that my results were at the very least able to be generalized within the school community. In other words, my interpretations and
conclusions from a small sample of this school community were justified and strengthened by all three data sources to provide a picture in which stakeholders in this particular setting could find meaning. In addition, the major themes that emerged around defining the appropriate roles of parents in this low-income, urban middle school may apply to other schools with similar contexts. Finally, the overall credibility is evaluated against the complete story told through the findings in each research question. I believe that the cyclical nature by which these findings relate to one another give evaluative validity to this study.

I documented meticulously-kept field notes and steps by which this research was carried out. However, the difficulty regarding the reliability of this research is the length of time and dedication to relationships that provided the backdrop to this research. As an administrative intern and then staying with the parent council for another full year assisting in events and fundraisers, my relationships with parents and teachers grew tremendously. The difference between a longitudinal study and my study is that I was not in the researcher role for the entire length of time at the school. I had been “in the trenches” with each of these stakeholder groups before I began asking them to formalize the conversations we had been having together for 15 months. I had heard their frustrations and helped seek solutions to issues. The candid nature by which these participants spoke in interviews and were honest during observations may not have been possible if I had taken on a strictly research-based role. Therefore, although it would be feasible to set up the structures to reproduce this research, the findings may not be as rich or sincere without time spent working with individuals.

Finally, the potential for researcher bias within the questions asked and data sources used were limited through the use of the pilot study. I was able to run questions and test data sources for accuracy and particular points of interest. It could also be argued that the amount of time
spent at this school and building relationships could bias my interpretation of the results. However, the nature with which I was present at this school working alongside each of these stakeholder groups extends my understanding of each group, their limitations, their role and their barriers to carrying out their roles more effectively. Despite the limitations to this study, there are great implications for this research.

**Implications for Practice**

Since my overall summary of the findings states that the implications for practice must begin with the school personnel in order to change the culture of the school around home-school partnerships, this section will focus on implications for practice by this school and perhaps for other low-income, urban middle schools with similar contexts. Additionally, since research question one focuses on the appropriate roles and thus implications for parents’ practice, this section will not readdress those roles. Throughout this research, participants had an abundance of thoughts regarding practices that the school could implement to promote more effective home-school partnerships. However, nine areas were clearly identified by all four-stakeholder groups and discussed within every interview as practices the school should undertake. Although all of these ideas stem directly from participants’ words, general summaries of ideas are presented.

*Age-Relevant Workshops for Parents*

Throughout interviews and observations, all participants spoke of the need for age-relevant workshops within two contexts: the age group itself, their transitions, peer pressures and struggles of adolescence; and the curriculum/content at this level of schooling using different pedagogies at higher levels than when many parents went to school. It would benefit parents if teachers could share their expertise and experience concerning the relevant transitions, struggles and possible risky social behaviors undergone by many children in this age group.
In terms of social choices, parents and children may not understand the consequences of risky youth behavior, which may have detrimental long-term effects for students. Without informed parents, family may not carefully guide students in social choices. Parents may be able to troubleshoot or proactively speak with their children if they are knowledgeable about the peer pressures that teens are faced with today. Through these types of workshops, parents may gain insight into keeping the lines of communication open with their children.

Through building stronger personal relationships with their children, instead of being intimidated by school, parents may also have more insight into their children’s expectations and workloads from school, and may be more likely to get involved in their education. Participants suggested that the school host events that allow parents to understand school policies and procedures better. Parents may not know how to navigate the education system, its current benchmarks or the standardized testing today. They may therefore be uninformed regarding the appropriate questions they should be asking of their children’s school or about how to navigate the system to access the best resources and make productive choices for their children. Once parents are empowered with these insights, they may be apt to get involved more effectively.

Consistent Forms of Communication with Parents

The student agenda book was frequently identified as a way of communicating consistently about students’ education. This is a book in which students are supposed to write in daily about all assignments, long term projects and tests. In addition to noting upcoming assignments and missing homework, some teachers also use this book to communicate with parents regarding behavior. Throughout this study, it was clear from all participants that this tool is more consistently used by sixth-grade teachers, but not after that, and perhaps if the school communicated this more clearly, parents would use this resource.
Another form of regular teacher-parent contact could be more regular classroom, cluster or even grade level updates to parents. When parents clarify that they understand school expectations, they send a powerful message to students that all adults are working in partnership. Instituting more regular updates would require that the school create systems of contact and information that parents can get in the habit of seeking and checking. A few examples of this were the all-call phone system, the use of email and a website, and a regular school-wide newsletter. The all-call system was identified by both staff and parents as an effective system that could be used school-wide, by grade level as well as by cluster to keep parents informed about events, fundraisers, big tests or projects and when report cards are going home. The newsletter could be used in conjunction with the website or an email list serve in order to be disseminated to families, since participants noted that students in this age group are unreliable in terms of delivering paper notices.

Consistent Positive Communication

This research clearly revealed a need for more positive communication from staff to parents on a regular basis. Although this finding has been stated throughout this study, this section reveals how to overcome the barrier of time. In working at this school, I was privy to the knowledge of the inner workings of homerooms and clusters. It seems possible to break up lists of some of the larger homerooms of students to have some of the staff who do not have their own homeroom also making phone calls. If each teacher had a list of students’ families to whom they were responsible for making calls, the responsibility could be more evenly distributed and less daunting. Many of the staff and parents spoke about how important this could be for home-school relationships as well as for parent-child relationships. This positive communication was depicted often in terms of acknowledging the individuality of each student both at school and at
home. The power in positive communication lies in both the connection the parents make with staff, but also in the message it sends to students from the staff. This parent engagement could help create a positive school climate and increase academic achievement across the school.

*Culture Shift in the Importance of Reaching out to Families*

Through school personnel’s recognition that by reaching out to parents, making them feel valued in the educational process and being very clear about what is expected of them, parents can become partners. This realization would require a shift in culture for both parents and school personnel. In many wealthier suburban districts, it is natural for parents to set limits for their children, create spaces and expectations for study at night and push their children to aspire to attending college. In low-income, urban districts on the other hand, all parents are doing the best they can with what they have and the model with which they are familiar. However, the models they have to work from are not always in the best interest of the child. Additionally, families come from various communities, so there may not be strong neighborhood connections or resources available. However, parents in underprivileged neighborhoods have access to school staff, if the faculty is willing to take on this role for the sake of their students. School personnel need to simultaneously set higher standards for their parent population while putting the support in place to give parents concrete examples of effective roles. In working with the staff, perhaps parents will become better advocates for their children.

The necessity for all adults to create a united team around the unified message that education is crucial. I can confidently express that we spoke at length at parent council meetings of how the parents could contribute to shifting the culture, but also about what it would take for the school personnel to endure the negative experiences with families and persistently try various ways to get families involved at the school. One of the ways that was frequently discussed is for
the staff to keep telling parents that they are essential in their children’s education process, especially at the middle school level.

_Tell Parents that Their Contribution is Important_

The practical strategy of telling parents that they are a key component in their child’s education arose throughout this study. The idea repeatedly came up regarding the frequency and consistency of telling parents they can make a difference, especially in this low-socioeconomic context. For many of these parents who had neither positive school experiences themselves nor models for parent participation, this is now a necessary role that schools today must take on. Parents may not realize that they are partners with the school in their children’s education without the school reaching out to tell them. This outlook must be a complete investment by staff and carried out throughout the school, both in all grade levels and across cluster groups. The knowledge that the child cannot be successful without the family entails the staff’s knowledge of and relationship with the family. In order for home and school to build the necessary understanding and trust of one another, there must be places and events in which these parties can come together to build their connection.

_Regular Positive Events_

For home-school partnerships in a low-income, urban area, there is the complicated component of the varied backgrounds of school personnel and families. To overcome background differences, it is necessary to have events in which families and staff can come together to get to know one another personally and to understand one another’s aspirations for each student. Throughout this study, each stakeholder group acknowledged the need for informal, more positive events not solely based around report cards, but also highlighting students’ talents. Participants spoke of creating this setting to communicate to parents the
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schools’ goals of helping students develop themselves as individuals and reaching beyond grades and the MCAS test. Events where the pressure is off parents regarding their children’s academic progress may be necessary to make them more comfortable at the school.

While more events would be time-consuming for staff, they may prove to be time well spent when a student is better behaved or completes their homework for a teacher’s class. Participants also spoke of the benefit not only for parent/child and parent/teacher relationships, but also for parent-to-parent social capital. Parents may be more likely to attend events or meetings if they know other parents. Participants were creative with ways to more effectively use time already allotted for staff to be at meetings or events. Some spoke about changing the format of conferences or open houses to include students so that their work could be showcased. Others spoke about inviting parent to events during the school day. In having these experiences and reaching out for support, it is also important that the school makes all objectives clear to parents.

**Event and Fundraising Clarity**

If parents are going to support school initiatives, families will want to understand the purpose of these programs at the outset. For many parents who are unable to attend events or meetings to learn about the goals of the school, they must receive clear information about what their financial support or time spent on events will produce. The parents and families who do understand the objectives tend to raise money and run successful events more thoughtfully and thoroughly. The success and additional money, which build community, tend to trickle into the school culture and produce more flourishing schools. In addition, participants spoke of staff member appreciation for the redistribution of the burden of planning and executing events or fundraisers. When staff members receive assistance with their extra-curricular duties, they are then able to focus more on the teaching and learning process. Without parent support, additional
activities are run by staff members and take away from their academic work. In order to use parents effectively in these ways, school personnel must be trained to understand both the value of building parent support and the best methods to solicit the involvement.

School-Wide Trainings and Expectations

During this study it was evident to me as the researcher, and to the participants themselves that the staff has a wide variety of backgrounds in both their pre-service preparation and value placed on home-school partnerships. Participants mentioned the limited training staff had in pre-service and masters programs for both teachers and administrators regarding home-school partnerships. As an extension of pre-service programs, home-school partnerships should be part of regular teacher in-service training. The administrators themselves were candid that clear procedures and expectations have not been set for staff. However, many participants recognized the outreach by sixth grade teachers through personal phone calls and the use of the agenda books. Since these strategies work in the sixth grade at this school, it is feasible that they would also work for the seventh and eighth grades.

Without clear responsibility, there is more of a problem when it comes to positive contact with parents. Within clusters, procedures need to be established to keep in touch with families regularly by dividing up groups of students so that individual staff members are the “contact person” for parents. This would entail answering parents’ questions or concerns and contacting families more regularly. The loosely-established system by one cluster leader referred to earlier could be used as a model for the school. The buy in and culture of the teachers and each cluster would follow with time. Once staff set clearly-established protocols and expectations, there might still be a time lapse in realizing results. Alongside the delegation of responsibility is the need for resources and training for teachers to put these ideas in place.
Participants discussed the expertise that already exists within the building around finding ways to reach out to parents with limited time and full schedules. Empowering teachers to share ideas and to train one another within the school community is feasible. Another idea included using some professional development time to have parents come in and speak with the staff about what might get them more involved. This may provide not only some concrete ways that staff can reach out to families, but may also sensitize the staff to all the home contexts that presently prevent families from getting more involved. Whether concrete ideas come from courses, professional development, peer mentoring or even from parents themselves, one thing is clear: the whole school community must be dedicated to shifting the culture creating and sustaining these critical adult relationships.

*Important note regarding these implications for practice.*

Over the course of writing these final two chapters including all of my findings, this district was supposed to be realigned to bring students to schools that were closer to neighborhood schools for families. However, due to equity issues of families feeling bound to underperforming schools, this re-alignment did not take place. Simultaneously, due to the costly nature of the cluster leader structure, two of the three cluster leaders from this study were put back into the classroom. At the same time, the school’s enrollment increased and the administration implemented two decisions to make the larger school seem smaller on the inside. All teachers within a cluster serving the same group of students were asked to change classrooms, so that students traveled less throughout the day and had a hallway dedicated to their cluster; and the number of homerooms were increased, which allowed for fewer students per homeroom, but stronger relationships between adults and students.
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From a researcher’s standpoint, the district change hurts these findings in that the school may still be inconveniently located for a parent to more frequently attend events and meetings. However, perhaps the fact that parents were able to express their discontent may empower them to continue to advocate for their needs. Simultaneously, the changes made within the school may help reinforce the above implications for practice. The decreased number of cluster leaders may push teachers to take more responsibility for their own communication with families. The smaller homerooms may allow for teachers to make more regular contact with families if they are individually responsible for fewer students.

*Implications for Policy*

Implications for policy will be discussed below on two different levels: state and federal; and school and district.

*State and Federal Level*

At the state and federal level, this research raises some important implications for policy. First and foremost, at the state level, there is a need to look at how we are preparing our teachers for the diverse classrooms of the students and families they will serve. While pedagogy, content, and management are essential, working with families is also an important aspect of the daily work of school personnel. Therefore, teacher preparation programs must emphasize both the theory and practice of home-school partnerships, while infusing cultural sensitivity training.

Along the same lines of teacher preparation, this study raised an interesting question about the varied certifications held by middle school teachers working under one roof. With elementary and secondary trained staff working side-by-side, states may want to consider creating a middle school certification that would focus on the needs and developmental levels of students at this age. With teachers better prepared to work with students at various transitional
points in their emotional, social and academic growth, school personnel may feel more empowered to share this information with families and connect more personally for the benefit of their students. If middle schools are to remain viable and not all dissipate into K-8 and 6-12 buildings, another alternative is for the state to devote money to middle school personnel strictly for the purpose of training them to work more closely with families. The need for this particular age group, both with study skills, organization and academics, as well as making safe personal choices. Although both of these teacher preparation initiatives are more directly related to state educational policy, they would need the support of the federal education policy makers to send a strong message to all universities that teachers must be trained to work with families.

Finally, if we are going to continue to raise the standards on students and teachers through standardized testing and accountability measures, then we must also consider raising standards on what we require of families. Educating our youth cannot be the job of school personnel only; parents and families must also be charged with this essential work as the primary educators of their children. Jobs that can sustain a family are no longer available without a college degree. Families must both understand this and contribute to their children’s education throughout the entirety of the schooling process. At the state and federal level, mandates on parent involvement should be considered.

School and District Level

As a continuation of the state and federal implications, it is also clear that school personnel training around working with families cannot end during preparation programs. Staff must continue to be trained to work with the specific population of the parents their school serves. Norms, protocols and beliefs should be shared in order to create a culture around the value of partnership with families. As this school-wide culture is built, creative applications and
more consistent contact with families can be established and trust between home and school can
develop more naturally.

From the theory of trust in schools, it became clear through this study that this school
cannot move forward without a common belief that both school personnel and parents will reach
out to one another more frequently and more effectively. This gap around multiple perspectives,
backgrounds, values and beliefs can only be bridged if these ideas are shared across stakeholder
groups and multiple parties are brought together to brainstorm more effective partnership
approaches. A common understanding of the parent role does not currently exist because
teachers, administrators and parents have not actually communicated regarding their values and
beliefs. By first understanding one another’s perceptions of the role of parents in urban middle
schools, partnerships could be created.

Although this is an essential component of an implication for policy within this school, I
would argue that other middle schools in this district could use these findings to present ways in
which parents could be appropriately involved as well as the means by which schools could more
effectively reach out to parents. I would also argue that this could be a policy for any school,
whether at the middle school level or not. If schools are not going to clearly define the
appropriate role of parents based on specific families’ abilities and struggles, how can we expect
parents to participate effectively? Perhaps at the school level, the policy should be to create
expectations and clear, practical strategies for parents at the school, at home and for
communicating from home to school.

Additionally, when local governments and councils are making decisions about
education, they must take a serious look at unions and the contracts that have been negotiated.
While protecting the rights and working conditions of teachers is essential, without more time
devoted to families, these partnerships will never be genuine or develop families’ trust in schools. The idea of teachers spending more time meeting with parents or attending positive events alongside families may help clarify priorities in schools around these relationships.

*Implications for Further Research*

The implications for future research are numerous given the fact that this study was exploratory in nature. Since there is limited research in the literature that focuses specifically on middle schools and on the overall appropriate parent role at this level of schooling, there is still much research to be done on this topic. Overall, given the state of the literature, it is necessary to begin with some statistical evidence, which would substantiate the notion that parent involvement actually does raise student achievement. Since the literature presents inconclusive evidence, statistical analysis would be a first important step for this area of research. In terms of more research that focuses specifically on middle school, the following implications for future research begin with the narrow focus on this school itself, and move towards a middle school definition in general.

The first area of future research is follow-up at the Revere school. First, presenting the findings of this research to the whole school community in varying forums, such as a faculty meeting and a parent council meeting would be desirable. Second, some action steps for the stakeholder groups to take should be devised. Then, it would be beneficial to return after some implementation time and study the effects of putting protocols and trainings in place.

This middle school is part of a large urban district that is currently debating whether to change the structures of more schools into K-8 or 6-12 models, rather than K-5, 6-8 and 9-12. The reasoning is based on district feedback that the multiple levels do not give students and parents enough time to get to know staff. Therefore, it would be beneficial to carry out this same
type of qualitative research in multiple schools to find out if defining the parent role at this level more specifically could affect the amount and level of parent involvement in the district.

Finally, future research could include looking more broadly at middle schools in low-income, urban areas across a greater geographical area to determine if these same types of roles apply to middle schools with similar contexts.

Conclusions

Parents are the primary educators of their children and the consistent “teachers” in their lives. Schools can no longer afford not to get parents involved with students’ futures reliant on the level of education reached by a child. Therefore, through this qualitative case study, I sought to define the appropriate role of the parent at the middle school level, determine the unique factors that impede more effective partnerships between home and school, and analyze the current situation using the sociocultural theory to determine if beliefs and values match the social structures in place at this particular school. Findings suggest that the parent role is unique at this level, as students are in a transitional phase beginning to be more independent, yet still requiring guidance to make appropriate social and academic decisions. The appropriate parent role essentially means consistently communicating with school personnel to monitor emotional, social and academic progress for consistency at home. The unique factors impeding more parent participation at this level are based on the age of the students and their adverse nature toward adults. Finally, through the lens of sociocultural theory, it is evident that the school community culture of time constraints, apathy or long histories of negative experiences with one another prevails over individual beliefs that home-school partnerships do matter in students’ school and social lives. Additionally, there are many overarching prevailing issues that go beyond sociocultural theory and overwhelm even school-wide culture around home-school partnerships.
Although there are evident limitations to this study, from these findings, implications for practice, policy and future research are clearly set.

*Author Note*

It has been said that, “schools are a microcosm of society.” I believe that this particular case study reinforces this idea. Today, the focus on family values, open and honest communication, character education alongside academics and trust among community members has been replaced by high stakes testing, overloaded schedules, impersonal communication and aloof community members. However, the simultaneous urgency to close the achievement gap for low-income, minority students is real. To create productive, educated citizens, we must be working to educate all children, regardless of race, socioeconomic status or where they live. The high-stakes once placed on high school has now trickled down to the middle school level for several reasons: social choices that students make at this level have lasting affects on their development; standardized testing requirements for a high school diploma occur in tenth grade (just one and a half years into high school); as students are transitioning and identifying themselves academically and socially, study habits, organization and motivational habits are formed influencing future schooling and career aspirations.

With increasingly overloaded schedules of educators and parents alike in low-income, urban areas, personal contact and relational trust is becoming virtually non-existent. Students are navigating multiple worlds of their home, community and school, but with less contact among these adults, students are receiving varying messages and perceiving the divides. This is not acceptable on an ethical or communal level. In my own previous work as a teacher and now an administrator, I have personally witnessed the difference between schools that fully partner with families versus those that do not. This is reflected not only in the school culture but also in the
levels of academics reached. Parents need schools and schools need parents if we are going to raise achievement levels for all students, especially in disadvantaged neighborhoods.
Appendix A
Parent Interview Protocol

A. General Background

1. Please state the age/grade of your child/children and the schools they attend.

2. How long have you been a parent of a child at the Revere?

3. How long have you been a parent of a child who attends the Roslyn Public Schools?

4. Overall, in what ways has your experience of being a parent within the Revere school been positive or negative? Within the Roslyn Public Schools?

5. Overall, in what ways have you felt included or excluded within the academic aspect of your child’s schooling at the Revere? Within the Roslyn Public Schools?

B. Perceptions of own role

1. What do you believe to be the appropriate role of a parent at the middle school level in helping their child to succeed academically?

2. More specifically, what is the role of the parent in their child’s education…
   - At school?
   - At home?
   - In contributing to communication between the home and the school?
   - In creating relationships between the home and the school around academics?

   Further prompts (as needed):
   - In contributing to curriculum decisions?
   - In contributing to budget choices that impact instruction?
   - In contributing to teacher and administrator professional development that impacts teaching and learning?
   - In attending and/or creating programs and events at the school around academics?
   - In fundraising at the school towards academic needs?

C. Factors that impact parent involvement

1. Overall, what factors impact your involvement in your child’s education? (For example, motivations or obstacles)

2. How do the schools’ policies and programs impact your involvement?

3. How does the administration impact your involvement?
4. How do your children’s teachers’ impact your involvement?

5. How does/do your child/children and their age of early adolescence impact your involvement?

6. How has your role differed from your role in elementary school?

D. Perceptions transpiring into Action

1. How do your beliefs about your role impact your actual involvement in your child’s education?
   - At home?
   - At the school?
   - In creating partnerships & communication between the home and the school?

2. In what ways do you get involved in your child’s education?
   - At home?
   - At the school?
   - In creating partnerships/communication between the home and the school?

3. What are the regular actions and communication used by the school to involve parents?

4. How do these vary by grade, cluster or teacher?

E. Implications for action

1. What do you believe schools can do collectively to more effectively promote working with parents as a means to raise student achievement?

2. What do you believe parents can do collectively to more effectively promote working with schools as a means to raise student achievement?

3. Is there anything that you are doing that directly promotes working with the school regarding academics?
Appendix B
Teacher Interview Protocol

A. General Background

1. Please state the grade and subject that you teach.

2. How long have you been a teacher at the Revere?

3. Overall, what has been your general experience with parent involvement at the
Revere? In the Roslyn Public Schools?

B. Perceptions of parent role

1. What do you believe to be the appropriate role of a parent at the middle school level
in helping their child to succeed academically?

2. More specifically, what is the role of the parent in their child’s education in terms of:
   - At the school?
   - At home?
   - In contributing to communication between the home and the school?
   - In creating relationships between the home and the school around academics?

   Further prompts (as needed):
   - In contributing to curriculum decisions?
   - In contributing to budget choices that impact instruction?
   - In contributing to teacher and administrator professional development choices
     that impact teaching and learning?
   - In attending and/or creating programs and events at the school around
     academics?
   - In fundraising at the school towards academic needs?

3. What do you think most parents believe or understand about their own role in their
child’s education?

4. How do you think parents at the school act upon their beliefs in their actions of getting
involved?

C. Factors that impact parent involvement

1. What factors do you believe impact parents’ choices to get involved in their child’s
   education?

2. How do you think that parents’ beliefs drive their involvement?
3. How do you think the schools’ policies and programs impact their choice to get involved?

4. How do you think the administrations’ actions and communication impacts parents’ involvement?

5. How do you believe that your own actions and communication as a teacher impacts parents’ involvement?

6. How do you think the children themselves and their age of early adolescence impact parents’ involvement?

D. Perceptions transpiring into Action

1. In what ways do you directly reach out to parents through verbal or written communication, programs, or events to involve them in their child’s education?

2. How do your beliefs about the parent role impact your actions / communications to involve parents in their child’s education?

3. What are the regular types of behaviors and communications that exist throughout the school to involve parents?

4. How do these actions/communications vary from grade to grade and classroom to classroom?

E. Implications for action

1. What do you believe schools can do collectively to more effectively promote partnerships with parents as a means to raise student achievement?

2. What do you believe parents can do collectively to more effectively promote partnerships with schools as a means to raise student achievement?

3. Is there anything that you are currently doing that you think promotes partnerships with families around student achievement?
Appendix C
Administrator with Teaching Responsibilities Interview Protocol

A. General Background

1. Please state the grade and subject that you teach. Please state the administrative responsibilities that you hold.

2. How long have you been a teacher at the Revere? How long have you had administrator responsibilities? Were you ever a teacher/administrator within the district somewhere else?

3. What has been your general experience with parent involvement at the Revere? In the Roslyn Public Schools?

B. Perceptions of parent role

1. What do you believe to be the appropriate role of a parent at the middle school level in helping their child to succeed academically?

2. More specifically, what is the role of the parent in their child’s education in terms of:
   - At the school?
   - At home?
   - In contributing to communication between the home and the school?
   - In creating relationships between the home and the school around academics?

   Further Prompts (as needed):
   - In contributing to curriculum decisions?
   - In contributing to budget choices that impact instruction?
   - In contributing teacher and administrator professional development choices that impact teaching and learning?
   - In attending and/or creating programs and events at the school around academics?
   - In fundraising at the school towards academic needs?

3. What do you think most parents believe or understand about their own role in their child’s education?

4. How do you think parents at the school act upon their beliefs in their actions of getting involved?

C. Factors that impact parent involvement

1. What factors do you believe impact parents’ choices to get involved in their child’s education?
2. How do you think that parents’ beliefs drive their involvement?

3. How do you think the schools’ policies and programs impact parents’ choice to get involved?

4. How do you think administrations’ actions and communication in general impacts parents’ involvement?

5. How do you believe that your own actions and communication as a teacher impacts parents’ involvement?

6. How do you think the children themselves and their age of early adolescence impacts parents’ involvement?

D. Perceptions transpiring into Action

1. In what ways do you directly reach out to parents through written or verbal communication, programs, or events to involve them in their child’s education?

2. How do your beliefs about the parent role impact your actions / communications to involve parents in their child’s education?

3. What are the regular types of behaviors and communications that exist throughout the school to involve parents?

4. How do these actions/communications vary from grade to grade and classroom to classroom?

E. Implications for action

1. What do you believe schools can do collectively to more effectively promote partnerships with parents as a means to raise student achievement?

2. What do you believe parents can do collectively to more effectively promote partnerships with schools as a means to raise student achievement?

3. Is there anything that you are currently doing that you think promotes partnerships with families around student achievement?
Appendix D
Administrator Interview Protocol

A. General Background

1. Please state your position at the Revere school.

2. How long have you been an administrator? Were you ever an administrator in another Roslyn Public School? If so, how long?

3. What has been your general experience with parent involvement at the Revere? In the Roslyn Public Schools?

B. Perceptions of parent role

1. What do you believe to be the appropriate role of a parent at the middle school level in helping their child to succeed academically?

2. More specifically, what is the role of the parent in their child’s education in terms of:
   - At the school?
   - At home?
   - In contributing to communication between the home and the school?
   - In creating relationships between the home and the school around academics?

   Further Prompts (as needed):
   - In contributing to curriculum decisions?
   - In contributing budget choices that impact instruction?
   - In contributing to teacher and administrator professional development that impacts teaching and learning?
   - In attending and/or creating programs and events at the school around academics?
   - In fundraising at the school towards academic needs?

3. What do you think most parents believe and understand about their own role in their child’s education?

4. How do you think parents at the school act upon their beliefs in their actions of getting involved?

C. Factors that impact parent involvement

1. What factors do you believe impact parents’ choices to get involved in their child’s education?

2. How do you think that parents’ beliefs drive their involvement?
3. How do you think the schools’ policies and programs impact their choice to get involved?

4. How do you think the other administrators’ actions and communication with family impacts parents’ involvement?

5. How do you believe that your own actions and communication as an administrator impacts parents’ choice to get involved?

6. How do you think the children themselves and their age of early adolescence impact their involvement?

D. Perceptions transpiring into Action

1. In what ways do you directly reach out to parents through written or verbal communication, programs, or events to involve them in their child’s education?

2. How do your beliefs about the parent role impact your actions / communications to involve parents in their child’s education?

3. What are the regular types of behaviors and communications that exist throughout the school to involve parents?

4. How do these actions/communications vary from grade to grade and classroom to classroom?

E. Implications for action

1. What do you believe schools can do collectively to more effectively promote partnerships with parents as a means to raise student achievement?

2. What do you believe parents can do collectively to more effectively promote partnerships with schools as a means to raise student achievement?

3. Is there anything that you are currently doing that you think promotes partnerships with families around student achievement?
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Leaving No Family Behind


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Leaving No Family Behind


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