

# The Initiation and Implementation of a K-2 Parent Involvement Program in a Rural Context

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# BOSTON COLLEGE

## Lynch School of Education

Department of  
Educational Administration and Higher Education

Educational Administration

THE INITIATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A K-2 PARENT INVOLVEMENT  
PROGRAM IN A RURAL CONTEXT

Dissertation  
By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

### **THE INITIATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A K-2 PARENT INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM IN A RURAL CONTEXT**

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Elizabeth Twomey

This qualitative case study focused on K-2 Parent Involvement in a small rural elementary school. It was designed to review the types of parent involvement that occur over time and to identify the most effective forms of parent involvement. The study also investigated specific teacher beliefs and behaviors related to parent involvement and documented any changes in these beliefs and behaviors as a result of being in the study. A final review of challenges to parent involvement was documented.

Data was collected from six volunteer teachers working in kindergarten, grade one, and grade two. Data collection tools included staff pre and post interviews, staff surveys, classroom parent involvement logs, and teacher monthly reflection prompts.

The findings of the study indicate that teachers do value parent involvement and that they believe they encourage this involvement in their classroom. The teachers also believe there is a link between parent involvement and student achievement. The teachers in this study identified many challenges to the creation of a parent involvement program including time constraints on parents and teachers, a classroom and school structure that may not welcome or support parent involvement, as well as an education or training issue

for parents, so that they may understand the benefits of parent involvement. It was also suggested that teachers would benefit from professional development in the area of parent involvement.

Implications for practice include offering workshops for parents on curriculum expectations and on the importance of parent involvement, professional development for teachers highlighting the need for parent involvement, initiating a coordinated school wide parent involvement program, and creating a welcoming and supportive school climate that encourages parent involvement.

Limitations to the study include the small sample size, the short duration of the study, and the researcher's role as superintendent.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

### **Introduction**

The schools' care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students. (Epstein, 1995 p. 701)

The job of preparing children for the future has never been one that could be called unimportant or simple. In fact, one could argue it is work that has grown far more challenging and complex in recent times. Given the current focus on accountability and standards coupled with an increasingly diverse population and ever expanding international economy, a sense of urgency has emerged as we talk about preparing our children for participation in the world. If schools under the current structure are to meet this challenge, they cannot do it alone. Parents and community must work together to help support the learning of young citizens.

Schools have long asserted that they desire parent involvement. The goal of connecting home to school is found in many mission statements, school improvement plans, and school board benchmarks. It is also found in both state and federal legislation.

There have been decades of research focusing on parent involvement and the multiple definitions associated with the phrase. Parent involvement can mean parents or family members volunteering within the school or classroom, parents attending child specific meetings or school sponsored functions, working at home with their children on academic tasks such as homework completion or reading, or even modeling academic behavior themselves (Cotton and Wiklund, 1989). Regardless of how it may be specifically defined in a particular setting, its significance cannot be ignored.

Diversity in student population will bring a diversity of family structures, experiences, and philosophies regarding the role of parents in the education of their child (Hoover-Dempsey, K., Walker, J., Sandler, H., Whetsel, D., Green, C., Wilkins, et al., 2005). This diversity of beliefs will also be found among the school teachers and administrators. The lack of clarity around expectations paired with no recognition of the multiple perspectives and personal histories can serve as an obstacle to engaging parents in the process of parent involvement. If schools are to be accountable to all students, they must understand that individual parents may need additional support to help them maximize their child's achievement. As our society continues to embrace high expectations for all students, looking for ways to support a diversity of learners and families must be seen as an essential element of the plan. For a number of schools, promoting parent involvement is seen as a way to do this. If parent involvement is to be a living, breathing, successful component of a school, the planning and implementation of such an initiative must consider a plethora of factors.

## **Focus of the Study**

As research indicates, there are links between parent involvement and increased student achievement, increased student attendance and improved student behavior (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, Sheldon & Epstein, 2002, Baker & Soden, 1997). This study examined K-2 parent involvement and teacher practice in a small elementary school with the hopes of impacting parent engagement and future student achievement. The study reviewed the types of parent involvement that occur over time and also reviewed the teacher beliefs and behaviors that impacted parent involvement in the classroom. Additionally, the study examined changes in teacher beliefs and practices as well as challenges to the initiation of a parent involvement program.

Through a number of meetings and informal interviews sessions with staff, it was felt that there needed to be a heavier influence put on early intervention and primary grade outreach as a way to engage parents in the process of their child's education. There was a feeling that if the early grades could involve parents in meaningful ways, than families and students would feel more connected and supported by the school. Given that research indicates that students in grades K-2, whose parents participate in school activities display better functioning in school (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasrow, & Fendrich, 1999), the researcher was focusing on the development of a K-2 parent involvement program. The researcher was seeing a number of students who could benefit from enhanced parent involvement. Programs and interventions that engage families in supporting the needs of children are connected to higher levels of student achievement (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). The researcher was looking at ways to connect the school to home and to start to

create a program that respects the needs of all families (Hoover-Dempsey, et al. 2005, Epstein J., Sanders, M., Simon, B., Salinas, K., Jansorn, N., VanVoorhis, F., 2002).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will be guiding the study.

1. What are the components of an effective K-2 Parent Involvement Program?
2. In what ways does the initiation and implementation of a K-2 Parent Involvement Program affect teacher practices?
3. How has participation in the project impacted teacher beliefs about parental involvement?
4. What were the challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program?

### **Theoretical Rationale**

The current research indicates that parental involvement can influence student achievement in many ways. A 2002 synthesis of research conducted through the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory drew a number of conclusions about parental involvement. Regardless of family income or background, students with involved parents are more likely to: earn higher grades and test scores, enroll in higher-level programs, pass their classes, earn credits, have better attendance and social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school. More of these students graduate and go on to postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

With the intensity of high stakes assessment and accountability, increased parental involvement can be viewed as a foundation for raising student achievement.

Dr. Joyce Epstein, of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University has spent a number of years researching parent involvement

and its affect on student achievement. She describes six types of parent involvement as: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community (Epstein, et al., 2002). By focusing on how to involve parents in their child's school life, a school can provide a foundation of support that will help raise their child's achievement level. Dr. Epstein states in an April, 2006 interview,

Many states require districts and schools to write school improvement plans and to identify learning goals each year. And many states, districts and schools have mission statements and mandates for parent involvement. All are now influenced by the requirements for research-based programs of family involvement in the No Child Left Behind Act. There is a growing awareness that it is important to help parents know what their children are doing during an early care day or school day so that parents can reinforce learning with conversations and activities at home. (PreKNow Website, ¶ 9)

In additional studies focusing on elementary school, parent involvement was shown to support greater academic success. In a study done by K. Hoover-Dempsey, et al., (2005) children whose parents provide support with homework perform better in the classroom. A study by D.L. Williams and N.F. Chavkin, found that the more parents participate in their child's schooling; the better the student achievement (Williams and Chavkin, 1989). Further research indicates that the more intensely parents are involved, the more beneficial the achievement effects and that the sooner the parents get involved, the more powerful the effects (Cotton & Wiklund, 1989).

Another area of research indicates that the greater and more focused the school outreach and communication to the home, the better the results. Parents are more likely to

become involved, either through volunteering or helping support learning at home, if the teacher or school personnel reach out to them ( Feuerstein, 2000; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Green, C., Walker, J., Hoover-Dempsey, K., Sandler, H., 2007). With the current research pointing to the significance of teacher communication to the home, there is a need to look at professional development and training for teachers in this specific area (Chavkin, 2000; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act and the No Child Left Behind law have mandated robust expectations for student achievement. Given that there has been an established link between parent involvement and achievement it is logical that these findings serve as a basis for public policy focus. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 highlights, among other issues, the need for parental involvement. Under Title I Section 1001 it states “The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (United States Department of Education, Title I Regulations, ¶1). It goes on to list how this can be accomplished and specifically states in goal 12, that one way is by “affording parents substantial and meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children” (United States Department of Education, Title I Regulations).

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 also uses the research on parent involvement as a foundation for legal regulations. The law has established formal expectations for parents to be involved in schools as advisory board members and as resources to individual schools (Massachusetts Department of Education, Education Reform Act of 1993).

The ways in which adults work together is another area of research related to the study. If sustainable change in the school is desired, especially with regard to parent involvement philosophies and practices, then looking at how adults learn together will help support this goal. Understanding that adult learners have a unique perspective is supported by the work of Malcom Knowles. He identifies characteristics such as motivation, relevancy, life experience and knowledge, as being critical when looking at desired outcomes for adult learning (Knowles, Holton, E., Holton, E.F., Swanson, 2005). There is also a need to look at how collegiality can be established within a group of educators. Collegiality will allow for an enhanced collective experience and may help establish a norm for continued work in the school. As Roland Barth states, “A precondition for doing anything to strengthen our practice and improve a school is the existence of a collegial culture in which professionals talk about practice, share their craft knowledge, and observe and root for the success of one another” (Barth, 2006, p. 13). Looking at research that supports the creation of a truly collaborative school community will provide a strong theoretical background for duplicating these practices in a particular school setting.

Chapter Two provides an enhanced elaboration of all the theoretical frameworks that were explored as part of this study. The topics included the current legal mandates associated with parent involvement, adult learning, definitions and descriptions of parent involvement, the connections between parent involvement and student achievement, and how and why parents get involved in their child’s education.

## **Significance of the Study**

With student achievement being the foundation of school reform and the basis of many local and national educational public policy goals and legal mandates, it is important that those in education focus on the wide array of variables and factors that may influence this achievement. If schools are looking to dissect the problem with hopes of supporting a solution, than they should look to parent involvement as one way to address concerns.

The significance of this study emanates from the awareness of how parent involvement may impact student and parent engagement and in turn, student achievement. The participants in the study focused on their own individual classrooms and their personal efforts to implement and document parent involvement activities. The teachers reflected on their own perceptions about parent involvement and how that impacted their outreach efforts and beliefs about what effective parent involvement looks like.

The researcher believed and hypothesized that parent involvement activities would likely have a positive effect on student achievement. It would also positively enhance the school climate, collegiality, and encourage more community involvement in the schools. The researcher also hypothesized that the participants in the study would be able to exercise reflection about their own classroom practices. Further, the researcher believed there would be challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program. If increased parental involvement in this one school could have a positive effect on both student achievement and teacher practice, it would likely be able to inform the work of other similar schools struggling with the same concerns.

## **Design of the Study**

This research study used a qualitative case study methodology. As this study of a K-2 Parent Involvement Program was focused on one school's journey, at a specific point in time, the qualitative design is most fitting. As Miles and Huberman (1994) state, "We can define a case as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p. 25). Multiple factors and perspectives were explored throughout the study. Some of these included parent perceptions, teacher beliefs and actions, as well as challenges to the creation of a parent involvement program.

The study took place in a small K-12 school district, one that had a total enrollment of fewer than 800. The study focused on grades Kindergarten, one, and two, and involved six volunteer teachers and the project coordinator who was also the researcher. Over the course of six months, the teachers tracked the parent involvement that occurred in their classroom and documented and categorized, in data collection logs, the various types of involvement. The categories used for data collection were four of the six parent involvement types identified from the writings of Dr. Joyce Epstein, Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at John Hopkins University. These four types are parenting, communicating, volunteering, and learning at home.

The teachers documented the ongoing classroom activities and also were involved in reflecting on the project, their level of involvement and their own growth or changes over the duration of the study. The study participants and the researcher meet monthly to discuss the project and the changes that were occurring. The participants answered monthly reflection prompts that asked questions regarding how the project was evolving in their classrooms.

The participants also took part in interviews both before and after the project. These pre interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a third party. The post interviews were hand recorded by the researcher. The questions focused the participants on specific elements of the project as well as on their own beliefs and behaviors regarding parent involvement.

Data was collected from parents in the form of a K-2 parent involvement survey. This survey was administered before the start of the study. This allowed the researcher to obtain data regarding parent beliefs, understandings and perceptions of parent involvement and current parent involvement practices.

The researcher collected data from a variety of sources as a way to support the triangulation of the data. “In terms of using multiple methods of data collection and analysis, triangulation strengthens reliability as well as internal validity” (Merriam, 1998 p. 207).

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were a number of limitations of the study. These limitations included the small sample size, the unique demographic of the study site, the potential for researcher or participant bias, instrumentation, and the short duration of the study.

Given that the study was conducted with six teachers in a small school district, it is possible that the findings could not be easily generalized to other districts looking to create a K-2 parent involvement program. This inability to generalize is a threat to external validity (Merriam, 1998).

An additional limitation related to the project coordinator’s role as superintendent. The study participants were given all goals and data collection information at the

start of the study as well information regarding confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the study. Every effort was made to ensure the teachers that they should not feel pressured into agreeing to be part of the study. However, “ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to the collection of data and in the dissemination of findings. Overlaying both the collection of data and the dissemination of findings is the researcher-participant relationship” (Merriam, 1998, p. 213).

Researcher bias was also considered a limitation of the study. As the researcher spent time reviewing literature and establishing the study methodology, it was possible that the researcher interpreted data in such a way as to support the original hypotheses.

Participant bias was also be considered a limitation. Since much of the data was collected by teachers who were documenting events in their own classrooms, there was potential for the teachers to want the data to indicate only successful activities. The researcher continued to remind the participants that the data collected was confidential and that it had nothing to do with their supervision or evaluation.

Instrumentation was an additional limitation and possible threat to internal validity. (Gay, 2006, p. 239) All data collection instruments were researcher created. As a way to minimize this limitation, all data collection tools were peer reviewed, piloted and tested. A final limitation was related to the duration of the data collection. The study only include data collected over a six month period, in one particular school year.

Several terms related to parent involvement were used throughout the study. These terms are defined here as a way to add clarification to the study.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Parent Involvement:** Home based or school based activities that are linked or related to a child's learning at school. (Adapted from Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997)

**Parenting:** Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families. (Epstein, 1995)

**Communicating:** Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications. (Epstein, 1995)

**Volunteering:** Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs. (Epstein, 1995)

**Learning at home:** Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions. (Epstein, 1995)

## **Overview of the Study**

Chapter One outlines an introduction to the study. It serves to highlight the focus of the study as well as the theoretical rationale for the study. It outlines the background of the study and lays the foundation for the remaining chapters. Chapter Two will provide an in depth review of the literature related to parent involvement. This literature review will focus on a number of different themes and will provide a research background to the study. Chapter Three will describe the research design and will provide detail of the research methodology, the various tools used for data collection and analysis as well as

the limitations of the study. Chapter Four will present the findings of the study and Chapter Five serves to provide a discussion of these findings as well as a discussion of possible implications of the study on future practice, policy and research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will review the literature relevant to the subject of parent involvement, as it relates to the creation of a parent involvement program. First, there will be a review of current state and federal legal mandates regarding parent involvement. Second, will be a review of literature discussing adult learning, teacher professional development and preservice teacher preparation with regard to parent involvement. Next, the research on the various definitions and descriptions of parent involvement will be explored. An additional literature theme will review the connections between parent involvement and student achievement. Given the current focus on school accountability and statutory requirements for parent involvement it is important to review literature that discusses these connections. Finally, a review of the literature related to how and why parents become involved in their child's education.

#### **Current Legal Mandates Surrounding Parent Involvement**

##### No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The field of K-12 public education has a number of legal guidelines as well as a number of public policy goals that address the need for parents to be involved with their child's education. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 highlights the need for parental involvement. Under Title I Section 1001 it states "The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (United States Department of

Education, 2004). It goes on to list how this can be accomplished and specifically states that one way is by “affording parents substantial and meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children” (United States Department of Education, 2004).

In 2003, the U.S. Department of Education created the *No Child Left Behind A Parents Guide* which included information about the law in a simpler, more user friendly format that would no doubt be better understood by parents. This document can be viewed as a way that the Federal government took legislation which greatly impacts parents, and made it accessible to the general public. “The idea has long been that a partnership between home and school will help students succeed. With the NCLB law, there is a new emphasis on parents as agents of accountability. Armed with information and choices, the thinking goes, parents will force schools to improve” (Keller, 2006 p.12). The NCLB parent document breaks out the Title I requirements that pertain to parent involvement. They include:

Section 1111(d) parent involvement requirements for the states

Section 1118 parent involvement for districts and schools

Section 1114 (b) (2) (B) (ii) parent involvement for school wide programs

Section 1120 (a) parent involvement for children in private schools.

(United States Department of Education, 2003, p.31)

By providing parents the access to the law and requirements for parent involvement, the government is addressing the public policy goal of informing parents of their rights under the NBLB legislation. The most robust and specific requirements for parental involvement are found in section 1118. This section discusses having written parent

involvement policies that include parents in school reviews and program assessments, parent choice, parent information about standards and curriculum and the ability for parents to access all school performance information. All of this information must be provided in an understandable and uniform format and, to the extent practical, provided in a language that parents can understand (United States Department of Education, 2003). In one of the most interesting components of Section 1118, the need to “build capacity” for involvement in order to improve student academic achievement is presented. Section 1118 (e) states, in part, that the school:

(2) shall provide materials and training to help parents to work with their children to improve their children’s achievement, such as literacy training and using technology, as appropriate, to foster parental involvement;

(3) shall educate teachers, pupil service personnel, principals, and other staff, with the assistance of parents, in the value and utility of contributions of parents, and in how to reach out, communicate with, and work with parents as equal partners, implement and coordinate parent programs, and build ties between parents and the school.

(United States Department of Education, 2003, p. 34)

It is clear from these subsections, that the law is mandating the task of parent education for both staff and parents falls squarely on the shoulders of the school district.

#### Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA)

Beyond the stringent mandates of NCLB for the State of Massachusetts, there are also State laws and components of regulation that provide for parental involvement in education. Massachusetts General Law Chapter 71 section 38 Q and 38 Q ½ describe two types of required district plans. 38 Q describes the annual district professional

development plan and how there should be an effort to address parent and community involvement. Section 38 Q ½ discusses the creation of a District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP) as a way to support the special education pre-referral process. The district plan should include ways to establish teacher mentoring and parental involvement strategies. (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1993a). Under the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, Massachusetts General Law Chapter 15 section 1G gives guidance for the Massachusetts Department of Education with regard to the creation of Advisory Councils. These councils are to make recommendations that will support the goals of the Board and one of these Advisory Councils is for Parent and Community Involvement and Education. The following is a description of the council's responsibilities:

This council advises the Commissioner and Board of Education on matters pertaining to the development of parent and community involvement in education. Its function is to be proactive and innovative on policy issues that relate to the enhancement of educational achievement of students in Massachusetts. Specifically, the Council will: assess statewide trends and needs; seek public and professional input; analyze information regarding parent and community education and involvement; advise and make recommendations regarding legislation, regulations, and program guidelines; and provide other programmatic recommendations as it deems necessary to fulfill the goals for parent and community involvement established by the Board of Education (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1993b).

In November, 2000, this advisory council created the *Parent, Family, and Community Involvement Guide* for the Massachusetts Department of Education. The creation of this

document may be seen as a way to again, put in understandable terms, the need for increased parent and community involvement in schools. On page 7 it is stated:

Student achievement increases, schools improve, and parent and community involvement thrive when:

1. Parents, families, and community members play an integral role in assisting student learning at all grade levels. (Student Learning)
  2. Communication between home and school is consistent, two-way, and meaningful. (Communication)
  3. Sound parenting practices are promoted and supported. (Responsibility)
  4. Parents, families and community members are welcome in the school and their support and assistance are sought. (Volunteering)
  5. Parents and community members contribute in school planning and decision making. (School Decision Making and Advocacy)
  6. Community resources are sought to strengthen schools, communities, and families. (Community Collaboration)
  7. Personnel training (pre-service and in-service) includes courses and workshops on parent, family, and community involvement.” (Educator/Staff Development)
- (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000, p.7)

The report goes on to elaborate on all these sections and to provide rationales for why each category is significant for parent involvement and student achievement. The rationales are clearly stated and describe ways that both parents and the schools can help students achieve through a diversity of parental involvement activities. It also serves to

offer some examples of successful program ideas for each area.

The state of Massachusetts also provides for parents to be involved in local level advisory positions. In MGL Chapter 71 Section 59 C, the roles and responsibilities for School Councils are presented and in Chapter 71 B section 3, there is a requirement for the creation of a Special Education parent advisory council. In short, the state, through many sections of law not only encourage, but require the involvement of parents in the schools (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1993a).

## **Adult Learning**

### Adult Learning Theory

As this study focuses on the creation of a K-2 Parent Involvement Program and how teachers can impact parent involvement, it is important to review how teachers learn individually and collectively. First there will be a discussion on literature about adult learning theory and then transition into a review of the literature on professional development and how it relates to improving schools. A final area of research will be related to the preparation given to preservice teacher candidates with regard to parent involvement.

When reviewing the work of Malcolm Knowles and others discussing adult learning, it becomes obvious that there are still differing beliefs about exactly what andragogy (or adult learning) specifically means. Andragogy has generally come to mean adult learning. According to Knowles et al. (2005) the strength of andragogy is that "...it is a set of core adult learning principles that apply to all adult leaning situations"( p. 2). In fact he chooses to focus on the core principles separately from models of learning. He describes the six principles of andragogy as "(1) The learner's need to know, (2) self-concept of the

learner, (3) prior experience of the learner, (4) readiness to learn, (5) orientation to learning, and (6) motivation to learn” (Knowles, et al. 2005, p. 3). Given the complexities of adult’s as learners, it is fair to say that there will always be other factors that may impact an adults learning process. These will include, “...the individual learner, situational differences, the goals and purposes of learning” (Knowles, 2005 p. 3). When working with adult learners it is important to remember all of these factors as learning activities are planned and implemented. A more detailed description of Knowles six principles of andragogy follows.

As stated, Knowles (2005) model of andragogy is built on six principles. The first, which is the *learner’s need to know*, assumes that adults must understand why they need to know something before they will engage in learning it. This is critical especially as leaders look to work with teachers on school change or improvement. If staff do not feel they “need to learn something”, than they are less likely to sign on for the ensuing work. The second principle is the *learners’ self concept*. If the adult learner does not feel confident in their own skills and strengths, than they may feel threatened by being told they need to “learn” something. It is important that the adults in the learning situation are invested in the process and are given the opportunity to self direct as needed.

The third principle is the *role of the learners’ experiences*. As anyone who has ever worked with adults knows, there is never a shortage of experience in any given activity. Adults bring varied personal experiences based on their backgrounds, upbringing, and age. If managed well, this should be seen as an asset to any large group learning.

Knowles (2005) states:

For many kinds of learning, the richest resources for learning reside in the adult

learners themselves. Hence, the emphasis in adult education is on experiential techniques-techniques that tap into the experience of the learners such as group discussions, simulation exercises, problem solving activities, case methods, and laboratory methods instead of transmittal techniques. (p. 66)

By understanding all that the seasoned adult can bring to the learning environment, a greater group learning may occur.

The forth principle is a *readiness to learn*. “Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations” (Knowles, 2005, p. 67). If changes are occurring in a school, than the teacher’s readiness to learn a new program or initiative may be enhanced by the reality that is being presented. Often collegial discussions or observations may serve to help someone who may not be ready to learn at a specific time.

The fifth principle is *an orientation to learning*. “Adults are motivated to learn to the extent that they perceive that learning will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations” (Knowles, 2005, p. 67). By clearly connecting the learning activity with the learner’s (or teachers) desire to address a “real life” situation, the buy in and investment in the project will be greatly enhanced. The final principle is *motivation*. Adults respond to both external and intrinsic motivations. By tapping into the motivation of the learner, a more enriching learning experience is bound to occur.

### Professional Development

Professional development is considered essential to continued practitioner growth and to implementing school reform. Professional development has long been viewed by many

in the field as a series of one shot, unconnected activities that are often not linked to the larger organization. It is fair to say that given the challenges that all school personnel face today, this type of professional development can no longer be supported as schools strive to initiate real reform. As Judith Warren Little (1993) states,

One test of teacher's professional development is its capacity to equip teachers individually and collectively to act as shapers, promoters, and well-informed critics of reforms. The most robust professional development options will locate problems of "implementation" within the larger set of possibilities. (p. 130)

As parent involvement is believed to support student learning and achievement, teachers and administrators must look for ways to engage in necessary and effective professional development in this area.

Many of the issues facing schools today can not be viewed with a technical lens. As professional development serves to support teachers and school leaders in their efforts to implement reform, it must be used in creative ways that "...embody assumptions about teacher learning and the transformation of schooling that appear more fully compatible with the demands of reform and the equally complex contexts of teaching" (Little, 1993, p. 129). When we look at the challenges facing effective professional development in a time of school reform, it is helpful to review current practices and trends as a basis for future planning. In Judith Warren Little's article, *Teachers' Professional Development in a Climate of Educational Reform (1993)*, she outlines the five streams of reform that she believes are currently present. She describes them as reforms in subject matter teaching; reforms centered on problems of equity among a diverse student population; reforms in the nature, extent, and uses of student assessment; reforms in the social organization of

schooling; and reforms in the professionalization of teaching (Little, 1993). Given these multiple efforts, it is not surprising that current policy has been impacted and that there are great challenges facing the professional development agenda. These challenges are often characterized as a lack of appropriate “fit” with regard to the type of work that needs to be done. Little describes the traditional desire to look at professional development as a sequential and quantifiable exercise that is often focused on skills development and instituted through the “training model”.

As we look at more effective professional development models, Judith Warren Little describes four alternative strategies to enhance practice. She defines them as teacher collaboratives and other networks, subject matter associations, collaborations targeted at school reform, and special institutes and centers (Little, 1993). She highlights these models and states,

That the most promising forms of professional development engage teachers in the pursuit of genuine questions, problems, and curiosities, over time, in ways that leave a mark on perspectives, policy, and practice. They communicate a view of teachers not only as classroom experts, but also as productive and responsible members of a broader professional community and as persons embarked on a career that may span 30 years or more. (p. 133)

As schools look to implement more effective and robust efforts that support reform, they may need to embrace what Little (1993) describes as six principles for professional development. These six principles would greatly enhance the work being done by schools with regard to promoting and sustaining high functioning parent involvement programs.

These principles are:

1. Professional development offers meaningful intellectual, social, and emotional engagement with ideas, with materials, and with colleagues both in and out of teaching (P. 138).
2. Professional development takes explicit account of the contexts of teaching and the experience of teachers (P. 138).
3. Professional development offers support for informed dissent (P. 138).
4. Professional development places classroom practice in the larger contexts of school practice and the educational careers of children. It is grounded in a big picture perspective on the purposes and practices of schooling, providing teachers a means of seeing and acting upon the connections among students' experiences, teachers' classroom practice, and school wide structures and cultures (p. 138).
5. Professional development prepares teachers (as well as students and their parents) to employ the techniques and perspectives of inquiry. It provides the possibility for teachers and others to interrogate their individual beliefs and the institutional patterns of practice (p. 139).
6. The governance of professional development ensures bureaucratic restraint and a balance between the interests of individuals and the interests of institutions. A principled view of resource allocation might balance support for institutional initiatives with support for those initiated by teachers individually and collectively (p. 139).

While it is clear that these principles do outline a new model of offering professional development that supports current reform efforts, there are challenges facing current practitioners. Some of these include the size and complexity of the reform movement, the conflicting models of current and future professional development, and the lack of integrated and embedded professional development within the regular teacher work day (Little, 1993). A critical analysis of these issues will serve to highlight possible solutions to the problem.

Another issue that impacts how well professional development initiatives are embraced is collegiality and the relationships that exist within schools. Without trust and a strong sense of interdependence, a school staff will likely not be able to move forward any reform efforts. “If the relationships between administrators and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative, than the relationships between teachers and students, between students and students, and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative” (Barth, 2006, p. 9). When looking at professional development, especially as it relates to creating and implementing a parent involvement program, one would need to be sure the structure works to support these positive and productive relationships.

Roland Barth states in *Improving Relationships Within the Schoolhouse*, that he believes strong collegial relationships in a school community will help to enhance professional practice. (Barth, 2006). When looking at professional development on a school wide level, it is clear that relationships will undoubtedly impact the success or failure of such an undertaking; as he also illuminates, “the relationships among the educators in a school define all relationships within the school’s culture” (Barth, 2006, p.

9). In a time of great reform, a school leader must work to support a positive, collegial environment that embraces the idea that everyone in the school community has something to contribute. Working together on professional development that supports ongoing communication with and outreach to parents is sure to pay strong dividends to the children in the school.

A philosophy that may serve to undermine collegiality and team work is one of adversarial withholding. Barth (2006) describes this phenomenon in the following way:

More often we educators become one another's adversaries in a more subtle way-by *withholding*. School people carry around extraordinary insights about their practice- about discipline, parental involvement, staff development, child development, leadership and curriculum. I call these insights *craft knowledge*. Acquired over the years in the school of hard knocks, these insights offer every bit as much value to improving schools as do elegant research studies and national reports. If one day we educators could disclose our rich craft knowledge to one another, we could transform our schools overnight. (p. 10)

While this example serves as a reminder that there is a vast pool of best practice knowledge, it is important to note that certain structures must be in place in order to maximize the collegial nature of sharing. Professional development will require that the school climate support not only congeniality but must establish a climate of collegiality.

Barth describes *congeniality* as a key component to our work environment. He believes without a congenial environment, it would be difficult for people to maintain personal relationships at work. As a result of this thinking, it is important to recognize that people want to work in a happy environment. Indeed, some of Knowles (2005)

principles that undergird his adult learning theory such as the learner's self concept and the role of the learner's experiences may be strongly connected to a positive congenial environment. But *collegiality* is what Barth asserts is the "...kind of adult relationship highly prized by school reformers yet highly elusive" (Barth, 2006, p. 11). He describes noting collegiality's presence in a school by observing "people talking with one another about practice, sharing craft knowledge, observing one another in practice, and rooting for one another's success" (Barth, 2006, p. 11). The significance of this principle to reform movements and professional development that yields excellent results on behalf of students and families is very noteworthy. Collegiality will allow for the hard work being done in schools to come together in a meaningful way; a way that allows professionals to develop a stronger sense of empowerment and satisfaction.

In the 1999 publication, *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice* (Darling-Hammond & Sykes), two of the chapters highlight the need for schools to serve as support for ongoing teacher growth and professional development. In an era of vast reform, it is unquestionable that schools must rethink how they offer opportunities for teacher learning and what types of structures are best suited to assist.

In an effort to establish schools that promote ongoing, school embedded professional development, noting how schools organize themselves to support this is important. In the chapter entitled *Organizing Schools for Teacher Learning*, Judith Warren Little (1999) describes how schools must organize themselves. She states,

Teacher learning arises out of close involvement with students and their work, shared responsibility for student progress, sensibly organized time and space, access to the expertise of colleagues inside and outside the school,

focused and timely feedback on one's own work, and an overall ethos in which teacher learning is valued. (Little, 1999, p. 233)

When reforms are pushing forward, environments that are prepared for strong school based professional development will be most poised to experience success. Little asserts that it is the job of the school to be far more proactive in the creation of opportunities for integration of teacher learning and the ongoing work of teachers.

The current demands on schools and school personnel seem to continually expand, so it will be of great interest to all educational leaders that we find a way to continue to reinforce the significance of professional growth while understanding the complexities of the school environment. Little (1999) believes this will be supported in schools that:

1. Emphasize teachers' individual and collective responsibility for student achievement and well-being, and make inquiry into student learning a cornerstone of professional development.
2. Organize time, teaching responsibilities, and other aspects of teachers' work in ways that demonstrably enhance opportunities for teacher learning, both inside and outside the school.
3. Employ staff development resources in ways that increase teachers' ability to make well-informed use of ideas, materials, and colleagues.
4. Conduct staff evaluation and program or school reviews in a manner consistent with teacher learning.
5. Embrace an ethos genuinely conducive to teacher development (Little, p. 235).

While she believes these systemic changes will bring about greater professional growth, she cautions that "one of the structural supports for teacher learning will succeed

without compatible values, beliefs, and norms-an overall ethos that supports a vital professional community among teachers and a strong service ethic in relation to students and their parents” (p. 253).

An additional chapter by Thompson and Zeuli entitled *The Frame and the Tapestry: Standards-Based Reform and Professional Development*, seeks “to understand what the core content and pedagogy of professional development should be like and to figure out how to propagate such professional development” (Thompson & Zeuli, p. 345). The authors believe that professional development is the key way to support the current reform initiatives. In fact, they feel that “...all systemic reform is a vast project in professional development” (p. 342). However, the old model of one time workshops, in-services, and “productive tinkering” will not work with such a hearty agenda. Thompson and Zeuli feel that teachers will first need to undo and unlearn some types of thinking about knowledge and teaching and learning; and that this “learning must be both additive (the addition of new skills to an existing repertoire) and transformative (thoroughgoing changes in deeply held beliefs, knowledge, and habits of practice)” (p. 342). This focus on new schools and practice will take a good deal of coordination and clarity at the school and district level.

While the reforms are large in scale and will take many years (at best) to implement, Thompson and Zeuli suggest that transformative professional development requires a number of specific elements. These include:

1. Create dissonance enough to provoke transformation in teachers about knowledge, teaching, and learning.
2. Provide time, context, and support for teachers to think.

3. Connect thinking and activities to the teacher's own students (keep it real).
4. Provide a way for teachers to create a repertoire for practice (new understandings).
5. Continue the cycle of new ideas and problems, new understandings, new performance, then keeping the cycle going.

Finally, they recommend that all people in schools do a careful analysis and review of the current professional development practices and then look for ways to make it much more effective.

### Preservice Teacher Preparation

The issue of the most effective model for teacher preparation is one that continues to be open for debate. With regard to adequate preparation for parent communication and for encouraging parental involvement, it is reasonable to ask; can college students, within the context of a traditional licensing program, ever be prepared to work effectively with parents? The research seems to indicate that even if practitioners think this is a topic worth covering in a traditional program, it is not common to find a specific course in parent and community involvement.

In 1997, the United States Department of Education, with the continued desire to increase student achievement and highlight teachers preparation, published *New Skills for New Schools: Preparing Teachers in Family Involvement*. This policy document highlighted current research on family involvement and teacher preparation. The publication followed the passing of two pieces of legislation; the 1994 National Education Goals and Improving America's Schools Act [IASA] which was a reauthorization of ESEA, and Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which also passed in

1994. With an obvious public policy goal of enhanced education and student achievement, the New Skills for New Schools (1997) report sought to address this goal by highlighting teacher preparation in the area of parent and family involvement (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, and, Lopez, 1997).

The report went on to identify a “framework” of content areas and goals for teacher preparation. Angela Shartrand, Heather Weiss, Holly Kreider, and M. Elena Lopez at The Harvard Family Research Project (1997) breaks them down as follows:

- General Family Involvement: Goals, benefits, and barriers to family involvement. Promote knowledge of, skills in, and positive attitudes towards involving parents.
- General Family Knowledge: To promote knowledge of different families’ cultural beliefs, childrearing practices, structures, and living environments. To promote an awareness of & respect for different backgrounds and lifestyles.
- Home-School Communications: To provide various techniques and strategies to improve two-way communication between home and school (and/or parent and teacher).
- Family Involvement in Learning Activities: To provide information on how to involve parents in their children’s learning outside of the classroom.
- Families Supporting Schools: To provide information on ways to involve parents in helping, both within and outside the classroom.
- Schools Supporting Families: To examine how schools can support families’ social, educational, and social service needs through parent education programs, parent centers, and referrals to other community or social services.

- Families as Change Agents: to introduce ways to support and involve parents and families in decision making, action research, child advocacy, parent and teacher training, development of policy. (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, and Lopez, 1997, p.21)

Since that time, there have been a number of efforts to enhance the knowledge and skills required by teachers in order to actively engage family in schools. State licensing programs may or may not choose to include a separate course, but most will have the topic blended into other courses. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) lists six standards for schools seeking their accreditation Standard one highlights the need for students to have professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn. Standard three, field experiences and clinical practice highlights that these “real time” experiences for student teachers will help them develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn. NCATE also suggests that the topic of parent, school and community partnerships be addressed in the curriculum (The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2007). While they do not state how these skills and dispositions will be acquired, it does show that a teacher candidate must have a very strong skill set and full knowledge base in order to be effective. The classroom teacher must have knowledge beyond content standards and lesson planning.

In 1992, The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, a program of the Council of Chief State School Officers, published a document titled *Model Standards for Beginning Teacher Licensing, Assessment and Development* to help identify what they believe are the necessary skills for beginning teachers. They specify

ten standards or principles to be identified. The tenth principle states “The teacher fosters relationships with school colleagues, parents, and agencies in the larger community to support students’ learning and well being” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1992, p. 33). They describe the knowledge, disposition and performances of teachers exhibiting mastery of the standard. In particular the document states, “The teacher makes links with the learners’ other environments on behalf of students, by consulting with parents, counselors, teachers of other classes and activities within the schools, and professionals in other community agencies” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1992, p. 34). With a number of professional organizations supporting the need for parent outreach and family involvement, most of these suggestions have found their way into teacher preparation programs at some level.

A number of research studies have been done on the status of parent involvement, as a specific subject, in teacher preparation programs. In 2001, Diana Hiatt Michael reported on a Pepperdine University study that surveyed 147 universities with teacher education programs. Hiatt Michael (2001) found that:

The survey raised questions on number of courses, types of courses, topics and class instructional methods. Of the 96 who responded to the survey, 7 indicated that parent involvement issues were not included in any course. Twenty-two replied that the school offered a course devoted to parent involvement, but this course was not required for K-12 teacher education students. Such courses were developed for special education or early childhood teachers or offered as an elective course. Ninety-three percent of the respondents reported that parent involvement issues were woven into existing teacher education courses, such as special education, reading

methods, instructional methods and early childhood education. (p.3)

Some of the topics discussed in these courses were parent conferences, parent concerns, and writing newsletters. There were also a number of different types of activities that supported the class work such as role playing, research studies, conflict resolution, project creation, and home surveys (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). The information infers that teachers of younger or special education students are more likely to have course work that discusses parent involvement.

Another survey done by Carolyn B. Flanigan, of the Academic Development Institute and the Illinois Professional Learner's Partnership was in search of information about preservice teachers preparation for working with parents and families. Her study states, "An email survey of 20 college of education faculty and the college of education dean at the five Illinois Professional Learner's Partnerships (IPLP) universities was conducted in September 2000 in addition to website reviews of course catalog descriptions and syllabi" (Flanigan, p.1). The survey specifically asked how professors were preparing the preservice teachers in the class to work with parents and communities. Many responded that they were covering it as a topic covered in at least one class session. Early childhood professors covered it more, and many spoke of the subject as part of the student teaching experience. A more comprehensive survey was sent out in April, 2001 seeking the same data. "The importance of preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities was confirmed by 89% of the respondents. Although 84% of the respondents taught one or more courses that included the topic, only 16% taught a course on the topic" (Flanigan, p. 2). In answer to the question about the preparedness of the education graduates to work with parents and communities 30% of the survey

respondents said students were well prepared, 51% said somewhat prepared, and 11% responded the students were unprepared. 95% of the respondents also indicated that they prefer having the topic peppered into the entire teacher preparation program versus 27% who would prefer a separate class. A number of concerns also emerged from the university staff with regard to parent involvement. They felt that some of the preservice teachers had judgmental attitudes about students and parents from different cultures or socioeconomic groups. They also felt that some students blamed the parents for student difficulties. Students also raised concerns to the staff that parent involvement may be a concern in the college classes, but that many schools they work in do not promote a lot of parent involvement (Flanigan, 2005). This study shed a great deal of light on how a college or university may go about assessing their own effectiveness in teacher preparation programs, with regard to parent and family involvement.

In 1988, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory prepared a study on family involvement in education. The authors of the study, Nancy Chavkin and Davis Williams, surveyed teachers in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas about parent involvement. 87% of the classroom teachers surveyed said they could have used more undergraduate training in the area of parent involvement (Chavkin & Williams, 1988). In an additional study, Blair (2002) also states that as of 2002:

Twenty-two states now include family involvement in certification requirements, and there are innovative college courses and programs devoted to family involvement such as the Parent Education Model at the University of Houston at Clear Lake, the Peabody Family Involvement Initiative at Vanderbilt University, and the Teachers for Diversity Program at the University of Wisconsin. However, most family involvement

training throughout the country is included as part of other coursework—mostly early childhood or special education courses. (p.2)

While there is certainly much more of a focus put on this subject in recent times, there is still work to be done in this area. This need is highlighted even more given the social science research and the current legal mandates in parent and family involvement.

The state of Massachusetts has made progress in the area of teacher preparation and parent involvement. While the state does not require a parent or family involvement course as part of the credentialing process, they do require a one year formal induction program with a mentor, as part of receiving a professional license (Mass DOE 603 CMR 7.04). The standards for this induction program involve an orientation, being assigned a trained mentor, the assignment of a support team of colleagues and even release time to work with the mentor on current issues facing the practitioner (603 CMR 7.12). It may be the goal of the department to require mentoring so that the new teacher may be supported through the challenging first year, which undoubtedly will involve parent communication and involvement.

The November 2000, *Parent, Family, and Community Involvement Guide* prepared for the Massachusetts Department of Education by the Massachusetts Parent and Community Involvement and Education Advisory Council also goes into detail about the expectation of educator staff development in the area of parent, family, and community involvement. As discussed previously, each component of the guide breaks down both the rationale and successful program initiatives with a specific focus. The rationales for the Educator/Staff Development Area are quite simple and understandable:

1. Teachers report that parent involvement is a top priority and challenge. When

schools provide training for all their staff, including administrators, teachers, and support personnel in parent outreach and engagement, educators work together to employ new ways of involving families in supporting student success.

2. Research studies confirm the strong correlation between effective parent involvement and increased student achievement. When teachers, guidance counselors, and others share best practices in involving parents and other caring adults, students, families and schools benefit.

(Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000, p. 20)

By using the Advisory Council as a formal “representative” of the Department of Education, there may be a stronger chance that parents, teachers and administrators are willing to review the information.

The Michigan Department of Education posts on its website (Michigan Department of Education, 2004) The Parent Engagement Information and Tools document (2004). It is described as a tool to help districts develop parent engagement plans and assessments. On page 76 of the guide are the results of a 2004 Parent involvement survey. This survey provides data from over 1000 parents and 1000 teachers about parent engagement. There is some interesting data from the teacher component of the survey. It stated that the average Michigan teachers works with 105 students and spends nearly two hours per week communicating with parents. 41% of the teachers felt uncomfortable in communicating due to language barriers, and 23 % felt uncomfortable because of cultural barriers. It also stated that some parents felt barriers to engagement due to work or other schedule issue. 90% of the parents also felt that they should be part of the classroom education and 67% seek out information on parenting. What this survey indicates is the

very diverse and time consuming nature of effective parent communication and involvement. If preservice teachers are not given an opportunity to understand this, it may be a source of conflict during their initial year performance.

While there is certainly no perfect way to train new or preservice teachers in the area of parent involvement, there are some common themes that emerge as you review the literature. There is a need for preservice teachers to understand the complexities involved in both communicating and working with a diverse group of students and parents. There may be cultural, linguistic or historical barriers to effective parent involvement. Research shows that parents need to believe their efficacy, which can often come from their own experiences in school. There are issues of role construction (K. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995) and understanding of social capital (K. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995, Coleman, 1991) that parents bring to the table. *The New Skills for New Schools: Preparing Teachers in Family Involvement* (1997) by Angela Shartrand et al. highlights nine promising practices in the field of Teacher Preparation. They are:

Guest Speakers: such as practitioners, parents, and professionals from other disciplines

Role-Playing: simulating a real experience with a parent, including how to negotiate a difference of opinion with a parent and discuss a child's behavior issues

Case Method: using dilemmas or open ended situations to help the student reflect on what might be the best response, given a particular situation.

Cultural Immersion: Having students live in diverse areas and neighborhoods, ones that are different from their own experience

Community Experiences: Working in community centers or social service agencies in particular neighborhoods or settings

Research with Families and Communities: doing parent surveys, interviews or ethnographic studies with families

Self-Reflection: Journal writing, reflection on their own families, reviewing assumptions about other families, and attitudes about working with parents.

Interprofessional Education: working with other students in programs like nursing and social work to encourage collaboration around family and parent involvement.

Shartrand et al. (1997) describes what made these experiences so valuable.

These practices focus on developing prospective teachers' problem-solving skills by exposing them to challenging situations which require them to negotiate sensitive issues. The programs provide them with opportunities to work in schools and communities—often under the guidance of experienced professionals—where they are able to gain valuable communication and interpersonal skills, especially when dealing with families with very different backgrounds from their own. They encouraged the use of information about families to develop family involvement activities and to create supplemental materials for the classroom. (p. 47)

In the conclusion, Shartrand et al. (1997) cite a number of recommendations in order to mitigate what they see as a concern. The researchers see the need for educating in the areas of family and community involvement as serious. Given what research tells us about teacher attrition rates in the first 5 years of professional work, it may be asserted that training on more “real school issues”, such as parent communication and involvement, may help. Shartrand et al. (1997) make the following recommendations:

1. Develop a national network to support teacher preparation in family involvement (p.55).

2. Evaluate the experiences and outcomes of preparing teachers to work with families (p.55).
3. Strengthen state policy guidelines for teacher preparation in family involvement (p.56).
4. Make training available to elementary, middle, and high school teachers (p.56).
5. Improve the effectiveness of training through collaboration across subspecialties and disciplines (p.57).
6. Integrate training throughout teacher preparation curriculum rather than treating it as an isolated component (p.58).
7. Espouse family involvement as a priority among professional organizations (p.58).
8. Sustain teachers' knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes towards families through inservice training (p.59).
9. Move beyond classroom based teaching methods by offering teachers direct field experiences working with families (p.60).

While there is no doubt that preparing preservice students to become teachers is a difficult job, it is one worth doing as completely as possible. While there may not be a most effective way to ensure that teachers are prepared for parent involvement, research seems to indicate that more time spent on *real* school situations the better. With colleges and universities struggling with teacher quality concerns in content areas, it may be a challenge to enhance licensing programs further. Perhaps, as suggested previously, these experiences are best crafted through the student teaching/practicum hours or even through a solid first year teacher induction program at the local level. With enhanced

parents rights under NCLB and access to information and advocacy just a website away, teacher candidates need to be prepared. However, perhaps most importantly, with decades of social science research to support the positive connection between parent involvement and student achievement, all teachers should be working to engage the home from the very start of their relationship with each child.

### **Definitions and Descriptions of Parent Involvement**

This section of the literature will look at the various definitions and descriptions of parent involvement, how varying research studies define the practice, and how this may be used as a way to increase the understanding of parent involvement.

Parent Involvement has come to mean a number of different things over many years. Some schools and parents traditionally believe that parent involvement is when a parent comes to the school for an activity. Given the recent focus on school reform and achievement for all students, parent involvement has now come to be defined by much wider parameters. An analysis of the literature will bring to light the variety and complexity associated with the definitions and descriptions of parent involvement.

In practice, parent involvement has been defined as representing many different parental behaviors and parenting practices including communication with school, communication with the child about school, parent aspirations for the child, and home routines to support learning (Fan and Chen, 2001). The National Middle School Association defines parent involvement as having an awareness of and involvement in school work, understanding of the interaction between parenting skills and student success in schooling, and a commitment to consistent communication with educators about student progress (National Middle School Association, 2006).

Dimock, O'Donoghue, and Robb (1996) specified school choice, decision making through formal structures, teaching and learning, effect on the physical and material environment, and communication as the five categories of parent involvement (Feuersrein, 2000). Baker and Soden (1997) identified studies in which parent involvement meant a variety of things including parent aspirations, helping with homework or other home based activities, parenting styles and behaviors, as well as attending school functions. It should now be apparent that “developing a clear definition of such a multifaceted concept is not easy” (Feuerstein, 2000, p. 29). Research indicates that while having parents attend meetings and events may be helpful, a parent’s involvement in their child’s work at home is just as significant (Hoover- Dempsey and Sandler (1997), Izzo et al. (1999). As parent involvement is still defined in a number of different ways, research results must be scrutinized by looking at the actual study description of the involvement.

Dr. Joyce Epstein, of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University has spent a number of years researching parent involvement and its affect on student achievement. She describes six types of parent involvement as: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. She elaborates on them in this way:

Parenting: Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.

Communicating: Communicate with families about school programs and student

progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.

Volunteering: Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.

Learning at home: Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions.

Decision making: Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations.

Collaborating with the community: Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community (Epstein, 1995, p.704).

Many believe that these six categories have come to encompass virtually all activities that one might describe as parent involvement. She also points out that these six types of involvement reflect principles of caring. Epstein (1995) states:

Underlying all six types of involvement are two defining synonyms of caring: trusting and respecting. Of course, the varied meanings are interconnected, but it is striking that language permits us to call forth various elements of caring associated with activities for the six types of involvement. If all six types of involvement are operating well in a school's program of partnership, then all of these caring behaviors could be activated to assist children's learning and development. (p. 711)

Epstein's research and beliefs indicate that these six types of parent involvement support children and work best when schools, families and communities join together in

partnership. She describes these powerful connections as “Overlapping Spheres of Influence” (Epstein, 1995).

The theory of overlapping spheres of influence is one that Epstein uses as a basis for her community partnership research and for all parent involvement activities. The underlying principle of the theory is that there are three major contexts in which children live, learn and grow; these being family, school, and community (Epstein, 1995). By having all of these “worlds” working together, and not against each other, there can be powerful effects for the child. There are relationships that exist within each sphere as well as relationships that exist from sphere to sphere. The child is always in the center, pointing to the belief that the child should be at the center of all decisions; and it is important for the child to understand that these three environments are working together to support them in achieving success (Epstein, 1995). The six types of parent involvement previously discussed can be successful by understanding the relationships that exist between the family, the school, and the community.

In a 1999 meta-analysis of parent involvement research, authors, Xitao Fan and Michael Chen sought to review ten years worth of studies on parent involvement. In doing so they were looking for links between parent involvement and achievement. A review of their research analysis “...suggests that parent involvement, especially parents’ aspirations for their children, has a significant impact on student achievement. Some types of involvement, especially expressing expectations for achievement, have more effect than others” (Henderson and Mapp, 2002, p. 111). The research also indicated that the individual studies described both parent involvement as well as achievement, in

varying ways. Henderson and Mapp (2002) state that according to the analysis done by Fan and Chen (2001), **parent involvement** was defined in these various ways:

- Educational aspirations for children such as expectations for their performance
- Communication about school-related matters, such as homework and school Programs
- Parents' supervising children's activities, such as homework, TV watching, and after school time
- Parents' participation in school activities, such as volunteering and attending events
- General parent involvement

**Student achievement** was defined in these ways:

- Grade point average (GPA)
- Test scores in specific subjects (math, science, reading, social studies)
- Other (promotion, retention, teacher ratings)

(Henderson and Mapp, 2002, p. 111)

As a result of the varying descriptions of both parent involvement and achievement, Fan and Chen (2001) hypothesize that this may be a factor explaining why empirical research on parent involvement may be somewhat limited.

In a 1996 study conducted by Esther Ho Sui-Chu and Douglas Willms, critical questions relating to parent involvement, income level, and achievement were reviewed. The data reviewed was from a large data base generated by the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88). The researchers noted that the purposes of the study were to “explore the relationship among parent involvement, family background,

and student achievement” and to “clarify types of parent involvement and how they may vary within and among different schools” (Henderson and Mapp, 2002, p. 119). They believed that in order to draw accurate conclusions regarding parent involvement, income levels and student achievement, they would need to isolate and define parent involvement. Ho Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) identified “four dimensions of parental involvement and assessed the relationship of each dimension with parental background and academic achievement for a large representative sample of U.S. middle school students” (p. 126). The researchers identified two home-based types of involvement (monitoring a child’s activities out of school and discussion of school activities at home) and two school based types of involvement (contact between parents and school staff and attending parent-teacher conferences and other meetings or volunteering) (Ho Sui Chu and Willms, 1996). Their structured identification and description of parent involvement allowed them to more accurately discuss their findings which were generated from a large sampling of students and schools across the United States.

As the previous researchers have sought to identify the exact meanings and behaviors that define parent involvement, so did Kusum Singh in a 1995 study looking at the effects of parent involvement on grade eight student achievement. Singh was interested in reviewing any connections between student achievement at the middle school level and parental involvement. As part of the study, Singh (1995) identified four elements of parental involvement including: “parental aspirations for children’s education, parent child communication about school, home structure, and parental participation in school related activities” (p. 299). Singh also used the NELS:88 data base for her study. Her research suggests that grade eight student achievement is in fact greatly influenced by the

educational aspirations of the parent. She also concluded that while parent –child communication about school did moderately impact on parental participation in school related activities, neither the communication itself or the participation in activities had any impact on student achievement (Singh, 1995). This research serves as a strong model for the need to identify and define parent involvement. Her findings would indicate that schools that are interested in enhancing student achievement through parent involvement may first need to work in partnership with those parents towards promoting high educational aspirations for children.

The descriptions of parent involvement will most certainly be different based on the setting of the program. In a 1999 study, Rebecca Marcon reviewed the parent involvement of preschoolers to determine if there is "...a threshold of involvement that can lead to positive child outcomes and if so, how much involvement is "enough" to warrant investment of limited parent resources" (Marcon, 1999, p.2). In order to determine this, she studied families that may have been seen as "hard to engage."

Her research initially asked teachers to identify the amount of contact they had with each child's parent (Marcon, 1999). She defined the contact or parent involvement based on teacher's observations. The four categories used in the research were "parent-teacher conferences, home visits by teacher, extended class visit by parents, and parental help with class activity" (p.3). She linked these four categories with student skill mastery. By using four general categories of involvement, it was easy for the researcher to determine if any level of parent involvement had an impact on achievement. She determined that parent involvement, at any level, did have a positive impact on student skill mastery. What is important to note is that the more active the parent involvement, the greater the

gain for the children, especially in the areas of communication, daily living skills, and socialization (Marcon, 1999). The researcher identifies a valuable issue when reviewing this parent involvement research. While she finds that the identified categories of parent involvement have a positive impact on preschool children's development, she states:

The exact mechanisms of this notable influence are unclear, making it difficult to determine whether teacher perceptions or actual child changes or some unidentified third variables are the source of higher ratings of children whose parents are more involved. It is possible that teachers rated children higher as a result of familiarity with parents who appeared to be more interested in their children's education. Such parent interest may have influenced teachers' willingness to work with children, resulting in an enriched school experience for those in the high parent involvement group. Enriched school experiences may have, in turn, enhanced children's sense of accomplishment, and produced greater progress than would have occurred with a lesser degree of teacher involvement (p. 5).

The significance of this study lies in the discussion of the findings. Marcon (1999) establishes a theory that when parent involvement is rated generally by teachers, and is linked to student learning assessed by teachers, there may be more of a "teacher involvement" factor that has been discussed. This again points to the necessity to clearly define and describe what parent involvement means in a particular setting.

*A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Henderson and Mapp, 2002) provides a research overview for a number of parent involvement related studies. A unique perspective is provided in a research study by Gerardo Lopez (2001) that was part of a paper presented at the annual

meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Seattle Washington. Lopez sought to explore the concept of parental involvement through the beliefs and actions of four immigrant/migrant families from Texas (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). The researcher asserted that the current generally accepted definition of parent involvement "...signals a specific set of practices that have been sanctioned by the education community. As such, parents and caretakers whose involvement activities fall outside the realm of these socially specific ways get labeled as "uninvolved," "unconcerned," and "uncaring" (Henderson and Mapp, 2002, p. 138). The selected families were part of a purposeful sampling because their children were deemed by school staff to be "highly successful in school as defined by academic and non academic accomplishments, achievements, and successes" (Henderson and Mapp, 2002, p. 138).

What makes this study significant is the unusual lens with which the researcher viewed parent involvement. His findings indicated that the parents of these children believed they were very involved in their child's educational life. However, this involvement would not be viewed by school personnel as it was not related to parent teacher conferences, PTA activities, or other more traditional parent activities. Their involvement was to show their children the benefits of hard work and the down side of not getting a good education or of dropping out of school. (Henderson and Mapp, 2002) Lopez suggests that educators seek to expand the notion of parent involvement so that more recognition can be given to beneficial types of involvement such as the ones in his research. (Henderson and Mapp, 2002)

As the discussion of the previous literature indicates, parent involvement may have a number of different meanings and definitions. These descriptions are often impacted by

the setting in which parent involvement is occurring. What can be concluded is that parent involvement, on some level, may have an effect on student achievement, a child's perception of school, and on the structure of the home support system. However, when reviewing the research, it is critical that the definition of parent involvement be clear in order to interpret the data generated from the study.

While this study does not specifically look at the connection between parent involvement and student achievement, a review of the research related to this connection serves an important role. Given that the underlying premise is that enhanced parent involvement will strengthen student achievement, this researcher feels the literature should be reviewed. A discussion of why parent involvement is important will most definitely focus on enhanced student achievement. The next section of the chapter will look at the social science literature in this area.

### **Parent Involvement and Student Achievement**

The research overwhelmingly demonstrates that parent involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement. Further, the research shows that the more intensely parents are involved in their children's learning, the more beneficial are the achievement effects. This holds true for all types of parent involvement in children's learning and for all types and ages of students. (Cotton and Wikeland, 1989, ¶ 13)

The current research indicates that parental involvement can influence student achievement in many ways. A 2002 synthesis of research, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement* published by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory drew a number of conclusions

about parental involvement. Regardless of family income or background, students with involved parents are more likely to: earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs, be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school. They graduate and go on to postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Providing a synthesis of 51 studies, 49 of which were conducted between 1995-2002, they discuss what is currently happening in research related to parent involvement and student achievement. Henderson and Mapp (2002) break down their “Key Findings” in the following way:

1. Programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children’s learning at home are linked to higher student achievement (p. 25).
2. The continuity of family involvement at home appears to have a protective effect on children as they progress through our complex education system. The more families support their children’s learning and educational progress, the more their children tend to do well in school and continue their education (p. 30).
3. Families of all cultural backgrounds, education and income levels encourage their children, talk with them about school, help them plan for higher education, and keep them focused on learning and homework. In other words, all families can, and often do, have a positive influence on their children’s learning (p. 34).
4. Parent and community involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement. To be effective, the form of involvement should be focused on improving achievement and be

designed to engage families and students in developing specific knowledge and skills (p.38).

A more in-depth look at a range of literature in the field will help to highlight the connections between parent involvement and student achievement.

As a result of legal mandates and the public policy goal of ensuring high achievement for all children, there is increased interest on how schools, parents, and community can work together in an effort to promote this agenda. Decades of research have indicated that parent involvement will support academic gains for students. During the pre-No Child Left Behind era this data was often accepted as logical but not necessarily scrutinized. As communities now reorganize the need to make sure students do achieve at high levels, the connections between parent involvement and achievement are now more important than ever. This belief serves to undergird the need for this study on the creation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program.

A study conducted by Steven Sheldon and Joyce Epstein (2005) endeavored to examine the “connections between specific family and community involvement activities and student achievement in mathematics at the school level” (p. 196). The parent involvement typologies of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995) were used to highlight the most effective parent involvement activities; the ones that supported mathematics learning. The hope was to identify which practices were most effective and in turn, replicable for other schools and teachers (Sheldon and Epstein, 2005). A review of the data indicated that three specific activities, used by all of the schools in the sample, “were rated among the most effective for helping students

improve their mathematics achievement” (p. 201). These included: “(a) giving parents information on how to contact mathematics teachers, (b) scheduling conferences with parents of students who were struggling in mathematics, and (c) providing information about student progress and problems in mathematics on report cards” (p. 201). These responses were generated from the sampling of adults in the study. It was their perception about what was most effective that was documented and not necessarily an accurate reflection of actual student gains in mathematics. It is important to the study, however, as this information indicates school personnel may feel most comfortable with certain types of parent involvement, and actually believe that they are most effective.

An additional set of data generated from Sheldon and Epstein’s (2005) study looked specifically at “whether mathematics related family and community involvement activities affected measures of student mathematics achievement” (p. 202). Their analysis showed that there was only one type of involvement that related to gains in students’ achievement on mathematics tests; those were Learning At Home activities (Sheldon and Epstein, 2005). “After statistically accounting for schools’ prior levels of mathematics achievement, the percentage of students who attained satisfactory mathematics scores was higher in schools that more effectively assigned homework that required parent-child interactions or that offered mathematics materials for families to take home” (p. 203). This data supports the idea that children need out of school time assistance in order to maximize their learning. Given that the work at home involves parents communicating with their children about school, this helps to buttress the

theories of Fan and Chen (2001) and Lopez (2001) with regard to parent-child communications surrounding the significance of school completion and achievement.

In a juxtaposition of this research, Balli, Demo, and Wedman (1988) had a different conclusion around the achievement effects of family involvement in math homework for middle school students. This study analyzed whether prompting parents to become involved with their child's math homework would have an impact on student achievement levels in math. While the prompts did increase the involvement of the family members (in 90% of the homes it was a parent) in mathematics homework, the post test data did not indicate that there were significant gains made as a result of this family involvement. Parents did report, however, that they were more likely to work with their child on homework if the school prompted them to do so and even more likely to become involved if their child prompted them. While this research seems to indicate that in this small (74 students in one school) sampling there were not statistically significant correlations between family involvement and math achievement on standardized assessments, there were some interesting findings on the individual level. Parent written comments indicated that they enjoyed working with their child on the homework or that the parents perceived a benefit to the activity. During follow up interviews, others indicated that time constraints and difficulty of concepts presented a large challenge. More structured assignments (requiring less interpretation of the assignment) were also favored by the family members responding to the interview questions (Balli, Demo, Wedman, 1998). While these two studies concluded with different findings, it should be noted that there were vast differences in sample size,

methodology, and additional research questions. However, both seem to indicate that parents believe working at home with their child is important.

As referenced earlier, empirical research conducted by Esther Ho Sui-Chu and J. Douglas Willms (1996) highlighted the connections between four types of parent involvement and student achievement for grade eight students. The researchers signified their interest in clarifying the types of parent involvement that may impact student achievement by purposely categorizing these actions as either school involvement or home involvement. Ho Sui-Chu and Willms noted this missing clarification stating, “Researchers have not adequately distinguished between these two general types of involvement” (p. 127). The first type, home involvement, was “...associated with discussing school activities and the other with monitoring a child’s out of school activities” (p. 127), with school involvement classified as “...pertaining to contact between parents and school personnel and the other to volunteering in school and attending parent-teacher conferences and open house meetings” (p. 127).

In addition to analyzing the connections between parent involvement and achievement, the researchers also looked at the variations of involvement at each school, as well as determining if any connections between the family background and parent involvement existed (Ho Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996). A weakness in much of the research up to this point was related to a lack of clarity on how much, if at all, family backgrounds, the types of parent involvement activities, student characteristics, or the school actions impacted student achievement in math and reading. As parent involvement can be a very complicated construct, this detailed research may offer some clarity on the topic. The literature teased out a good deal of information and came to a

number of conclusions including that the wide sampling did not seem to indicate that there were vast differences in data from school to school, that higher income families were not far more involved than other lower income families, and that parents spoke about school at home more with girls than boys but that parents of boys engaged in more communication with the school (Ho Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996). In additional studies (Fan and Chen, 1999) an increased level of home school communication actually had a negative effect on achievement. It is theorized that in many cases increased contact from school to the home is an indicator of an issue (either academically or behaviorally) that is emerging and therefore may be a result of a negative school based experience.

With regard to student achievement, the researches also concluded with some interesting and promising data. Ho Shi-Chu and Willms (1996) state:

Schools did differ significantly in levels of involvement associated with participation as volunteers or attendance at PTO meetings, but this type of involvement had only a modest effect on reading achievement and a negligible effect on mathematics achievement. It was involvement at home, particularly in discussing school activities and helping children plan their programs, that had the strongest relationship to academic achievement. (p. 137)

These findings, again, serve as a support for promoting parent involvement activities that involve the home. Parents working with children at home on school subjects, speaking with them about their courses and the future, and actively promoting school engagement have continued to reap the most significant student benefits (Hoover-

Dempsey and Sandler, 1995, Singh, 1995, Izzo et al. 1999, Ho Sui-Chu, 1996, Marcon, 1999).

The implications for these findings lie in how schools are best able to support parents as they work at home with their children. Since it is generally believed that a child needs additional, ongoing support outside of school to enhance their achievement (Epstein, 1995) this literature will serve to help schools craft appropriate programs for their populations.

Studies that offer a look at long and short term benefits of parent involvement can also be critical in framing the conversation about best practice. In a retrospective review of parent involvement in preschool and kindergarten, researchers Wendy Miedel and Arthur Reynolds (1999) investigated to see if previous, early parent involvement activities were having a longer term impact on student achievement. Parents of grade eight students were asked describe the types and frequencies of parent involvement activities they were involved in when their children were in preschool and kindergarten. (Miedel and Reynolds, 1999). “Results indicated that even after controlling for family background, the number of activities in which parents participated in preschool and kindergarten was significantly associated with higher reading achievement, with lower rates of grade retention at age 14 (eighth grade), and with fewer years in special education (p. 379). This information, which indicates promising results for long term achievement will also serve to promote the benefits of early grades parent involvement programming.

In a similar study done by Wendy Miedel Barnard (2004), elementary school parent involvement was reviewed to determine if there were implications for success at the

high school level. The researcher “concentrated on variables that are educationally meaningful: school dropout at age 20, high school completion at age 20, and the highest grade completed at age 20” (p. 44). When analyzing the data, which was based on both teacher and parent reporting, a number of significant findings were apparent. The results indicated that while parents and teachers reported instances of involvement somewhat differently, there was a positive connection established between parent involvement in early grades and successfully finishing high school (Barnard, 2004).

An additional set of questions seemed to arise from this research related to differences in parent and teacher reporting of parent involvement. In some instances, the teachers reporting of parent involvement was higher than the actual parent reporting. The reasons for this can not be conclusively established. In another study (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane, 2007) these same findings were confirmed. This may be seen as reinforcement for the need to aptly clarify and define what is meant by parent involvement. There is also a need to clarify what is meant by the term achievement. If schools are serious about increasing parent involvement to support student achievement, they must have a clear understanding of what is needed and what perceptions exist regarding parental involvement (Keith & Keith, 1993). If not, they will run the risk of pushing away parents who have a different understanding and a different set of expectations.

When looking to identify the impact of parent involvement on achievement, a number of considerations must be made including definitions of parent involvement, family background, data used to determine achievement or educational gain, as well as who is in the sample reporting the activities. Keith and Keith (1993) were in search of

information to determine if parent involvement at the middle school level had an impact on academic learning (Keith and Keith, 1993). They used data reported by both students and parents, and eliminated the teacher perspective in the research. The researches defined parent involvement as parent's aspirations for their child's success and parent to child communication about school. What they determined was that parent involvement had a strong effect on eighth grade achievement (Keith and Keith, 1993). A careful analysis of their data indicated that the children who spent more time doing home work and reading at home had more involved parents. These students also had higher levels of achievement. The researcher concluded, "A substantial portion of the effect of parental involvement was through homework; parents who are more involved influence their children to do more homework (including at home reading), and that homework in turn, improves student achievement" (Keith and Keith, 1993, ¶ 47).

The question then becomes one of focusing in on the behaviors of parents to support student learning. Given that there is a body of research to indicate that home activities that focused on homework, reading, talking about school, the importance of school and aspirations for success and achievement may have a powerful impact on student achievement (Sheldon and Epstein, 2005, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995, Singh, 1995, Izzo 1999, Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996, Keith & Keith, 1993), how will schools help to plan and implement parent involvement programs that focus on raising student achievement.

While this study does not specifically look at the effects of parent involvement on achievement, it does look at the planning and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program. This researcher, along with many cited in the literature, believe

that student achievement is the underlying statutory, public policy, and practical goal of all parent involvement activities. If not, there would not be such interest in promoting the home school connection. The next section of this literature review will look at research and social science evidence as a way to illuminate why and how parents become involved and what barriers currently exist to improved parent involvement.

### **Why and How Parents Get Involved in Their Child's Education**

With many research findings pointing to the need for parent involvement, a review of literature related to why parents become involved will add further depth to this study. As schools seek to involve parents as a way to increase student engagement, family engagement, and student achievement, it is critical for the schools to review what they do to support parents and how they display, through their actions, their commitment to parent involvement. It is also important to review literature related to the barriers that may exist for parent involvement. A school committed to creating partnerships with families, must be aware of any possible language, beliefs, or actions that will send negative messages to parents.

Parents may become involved in their child's education in a number of ways. As previously discussed, exactly how involvement is defined will impact how we interpret the actual amount that exists. This involvement may be impacted by school and teacher practices, student age or course and subject expectations, and social issues or personal beliefs embraced by parents, students, and school personnel (Coleman, 1991; Epstein and Dauber, 1991; Eccles and Harold, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995; Lareau and Horvat, 1999; Chavkin, 2000; Feuerstein, 2000; Mapp 2003; Souto-Manning and Swick, 2006 ). Much of the literature in this area is based on reporting by either parents

or school personnel. As a result of this form of data collection, there may likely be an inevitable link between personal beliefs or experiences and how members of a sample will respond to a given set of questions or circumstances.

Given the unique characteristics of families and individual schools, a parent involvement program must be created by understanding the particular environment in which it is occurring. While a successful parent involvement program will have general characteristics, there are many more individualized practices that must be created with a full understanding of the community.

As a way to highlight what parents were saying about parent involvement, Karen Mapp (2003) worked to “identify factors that led to successful educational partnerships between schools and families” (p. 37). The researcher was interested in the parent viewpoint, as she hoped it would help to raise awareness of this important perspective. An additional goal of the research was to “investigate factors that influenced parents’ involvement in their children’s education in an attempt to understand the motivations, incentives, expectations, and apprehensions influencing parents’ participation in their children’s educational development” (p. 38). These ideas have also been explored in other environments with different populations ( Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995, Eccles and Harold, 1993, Feuerstein, 2005) all in search of data to uncover why parents become involved in their child’s education.

Mapp’s focus was on one urban elementary school with a very diverse population; including many low income families. Given the demographics and potential for people to label diverse, low income, urban parents as “hard to reach”, this specific sample would provide usable and significant data. The findings seem to connect to previous research on

parent involvement by indicating that “parents expressed a genuine and deep seated desire to help their children succeed in school. Parents wanted their children to succeed academically and were motivated to do what they could to ensure their children’s academic success” (Mapp, 2003, p. 42). While the sampling was small and confined to one school, the parent involvement program and benefits were well articulated by the actual parents in the school. The parents felt that they had a clear understanding that their involvement helped their children and believed their children responded and achieved as a result of their involvement (Mapp, 2003). The parents also reported being involved in both “traditional” and more non traditional forms of parent involvement. Some of this at-home involvement was related to the cultural background of the family (Mapp, 2003). The identification of these involvement practices, can serve as a foundation for building an effective program in schools with similar parent populations. The parents also identified both “social” and “school” factors that influenced their involvement. The parents articulated that their own school experiences and histories had an impact on their involvement, as did time commitments, other responsibilities and cultural norms and values (Mapp, 2003). They also believed that a strong relationship with the school personnel (and one that displayed respect for them) helped encourage their participation. “When school staff engage in caring and trustful relationships with parents that recognize parents as partners in the educational development of children, these relationships enhance parents’ desire to be involved” (Mapp, 2003, p.55).

Taken as a whole, this study identifies specific actions that may enhance parent participation. By having parents illuminate effective school practices that encouraged their involvement, a rich and helpful set of data has been highlighted and may be used to

inform practice at other school sites. A number of these findings with regard to communication, clarity, and respect for parents are supported by other studies (Epstein and Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, et al, 2005; Souto-Manning and Swick, 2006) seeking to answer the question: What can parents tell us about their involvement in schools and what can schools do to help increase parent involvement?

When looking at the importance of parent involvement, schools must carefully and critically look at their outreach programs to determine if the effectiveness of such programs is based on any particular practice or belief. A 1995 article by Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler asserted that there were multiple reasons and factors that parents became involved in their child's education. They believe:

Parents become involved primarily because (a) they develop a personal construction of the parental role that includes participation in their children's education, (b) they have developed a positive sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school and (c) they perceive opportunities or demands for involvement from children and the school. (p. 310)

While it is important to identify the elements of successful parent involvement programs, Hoover- Dempsey and Sandler (1995) felt that a critical component to parental involvement is reviewing "parents decisions to become involved, their choice of involvement forms, or the effects of their involvement on student outcomes" (p. 313).

When looking at why and how parents become involved, the researchers believe the primary reasons are extremely personal. One of these personal reasons is parental role construction. Parent role construction is defined "as parents' beliefs about what they are

supposed to do in relation to their children's education and the patterns of parental behavior that follow those beliefs" (Hoover-Dempsey, et al, 2005). If a school is eager to engage parents, they must be aware that the role of parent and how it supports a child's education is as individual as the children and parents of a school. If parents do not believe it is their role to become involved, than they will not seek out opportunities (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995). While believing that parent involvement is an element of their parental role, there is no guarantee that a parent will act on this principle. In some instances, a parent may believe that they are not able to do whatever is requested. This is referred to as their *sense of efficacy*. Hoover-Demsey and Sandler (1995) believe,

Parents' sense of efficacy comes from four sources: the direct experience of success in other involvement or involvement related activities; the vicarious experience of others' success in involvement or involvement related activities; verbal persuasion by others that involvement activities are worthwhile and can be accomplished by the parent; and the emotional arousal induced when issues of importance to the parent- for example, his or her child's well being or success, his or her own success as a parent- are on the line. (p. 314)

This sense of efficacy that the parent feels is a critical component to motivate parents to act. If a parent does not believe they are able to successfully become involved, then they will not. The trickle down effect of this, with regard to student achievement and a child's own sense of efficacy, is evident. Children watch and learn from their parents and will be absorbing the messages provided by their parents as they create their own sense of efficacy. The school must work to provide experiences for parents that will support

enhancing their sense of efficacy (skills and knowledge) as a way to bolster this idea in the students they serve.

An additional factor believed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) to potentially impact the level of parent involvement is related to the opportunities for involvement. Parents either perceive opportunities to become involved or feel demands for involvement (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995). What is most important to this discussion, however, is the fact that simple invitations or even demands for involvement will likely not impact parent choice for involvement if their sense of efficacy does not support it.

According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995), these factors working together will only support student learning if the parent chooses to become involved. The type and level of involvement will likely be selected based on the parents' skills and knowledge (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995). This should not be surprising to anyone. Parents will lend their support or become involved in tasks that they believe they can be successful with. Parents may also be impacted by the demands of work or other family obligations (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995). A school that is interested in creating successful parent involvement initiatives would need to consider the many variables that impact a parent's choice and opportunity to become involved.

When seeking answers to why and how parents become successfully involved in their children's education, one must take a critical look at identifying barriers to involvement. When searching to uncover various influences on parent involvement, Jacquelynne Eccles and Rena Harold (1993) researched the many characteristics of schools, families, and communities in an effort to determine effective parent involvement that would

support healthy teen development. Their model looked at factors that influenced family involvement including parent and family characteristics, community characteristics, child characteristics, and school and teacher characteristics and practices (Eccles and Harold, 1993). Parent and family characteristics included “social and psychological resources available to the parent, parents’ sense of efficacy, parents perceptions of their child, parents’ role construction, parents attitude towards school, parents ethnic identity, and parents socialization practices and history of involvement with their child’s education” (p. 572). The community characteristics included living in high risk, low resource neighborhoods and the child characteristics included gender, age, the child’s previous academic experiences as well as the child’s personality (Eccles and Harold, 1993).

Perhaps what is most significant, especially to this study on the planning of a parent involvement program, is the discussion of school and teacher characteristics that may influence or discourage involvement. Again, we now know that there are many variables involved in an effective parent involvement program; but a look towards general school based behaviors may serve as the starting point for success. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) identified a number of factors that will encourage or inhibit parent choices to become involved. School and teacher behaviors that are sensitive to the parent’s they serve may stand the best chance at meeting with success. Eccles and Harold (1993) also discuss challenges to involvement (especially at the middle level) as well as highlighting some recommendations for enhancing programs. While the organizational structure of a building may discourage parent involvement, there are also concrete teacher practices that will influence a school’s parent involvement, including:

(a) Beliefs about the appropriate amount and type of parent involvement, (b) beliefs about influences on parents' levels of participation, particularly their beliefs as to why parents are not more involved, (c) sense of efficacy about their ability to affect the parents level of participation, (d) knowledge of specific strategies for getting parents more involved, (e) plans for implementing these strategies, and (f) support for implementing specific plans. (p. 577)

This study serves to illuminate the challenges and barriers to potential parent involvement, as well as to highlight entry points for schools seeking to build up a program. By discussing the challenges that exist, a school committed to establishing a robust parent involvement program will know what the potential problems are and plan to resolve them before they even begin. While a school staff may not have control over variables in the homes, they can certainly be in control of their own behaviors and work in a way that encourages communication and partnership with families. "When teachers make parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interactions with their children at home, feel more positive about their abilities to help their children in the elementary grades and rate the teachers as better teachers overall" (Epstein and Dauber, 1991, p. 289).

When reviewing why parents get involved in their child's education or the possible barriers to involvement, the notion of social capital will emerge. Looking at the social inequalities that exist in a community, and quite likely a school in that community, will serve as a way to discover potential barriers but also serve to open up conversations about how to best equalize that capital in the school setting. If schools

create access or solicit parent support, and believe that there is a narrow description of this behavior, the school will likely continue to allow access only to certain groups. Coleman (1991) describes human capital as "...a property of individual persons" (p. 7) and states that "...social capital exists in relations between persons" (p. 7). If social capital is based on relationships, than a school interested in equalizing access to families who may lack human capital, will work to create a community where all types of parent involvement are welcome and encouraged. Teacher beliefs and practices can often work to assist in this endeavor. It is important, however, "to build common understanding about shared goals and common support among teachers, parents, and principles" (Epstein and Dauber, 1991). One could even add community to that list, especially given the complex society we currently live in.

If we are serious about achievement for all children, and believe that parent and family involvement are critical to supporting this goal, than the school must understand the personal, historical and cultural factors influencing involvement. Definitions and descriptions of involvement activities must be clear and free of judgment. Schools and practitioners must realize that children and parents enter the school with differing levels of cultural and social capital and that it is the obligation of the school personnel to work to mitigate this issue wherever possible. Teachers must believe that parent involvement is important and schools must recognize the significance of their actions in welcoming and supporting this involvement. Indeed, teacher attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors may be the key to increasing meaningful parent involvement. As Anderson and Minke (2007) discovered, "The emergence of specific invitations from teachers as the single most influential variable on parents'

involvement choices is significant because schools are able to influence teacher practices more so than any other variable” (p. 321). If high achievement for all children is truly the goal than schools must continue to recognize that parents are true partners in this process.

### **Conclusion**

When looking at the literature on parent involvement, it is evident that there are multiple perspectives around this topic. Some of this is directly related to how a school or organization describes and defines parent involvement as well as how parents perceive both the expectation and invitation to become involved in their child’s education. When seeking to improve family engagement and student achievement the literature highlights a number of potential activities that would support these goals. Unquestionably, the role that both the teacher and school play in highlighting the need and desire for parent involvement is critical. If a school wishes to have a truly effective parent involvement program, they must understand the need for clarity and coordination of program details, outreach methods, professional development, and parent education and support.

Chapter Three serves to outline and describe the design of the research. This includes the research questions, the research methodology, the sample and rationale for the sample as well as a description of the pilot test. Chapter Three also details the data gathering procedures, the methods of data analysis and the formats for reporting of the data. The framework for discussion of the findings and the limitations of the study is also detailed in the chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN

#### Introduction

This chapter describes a qualitative case study. The focus of the case study was the beginning phase of the initiation and implementation of a K-2 Parent Involvement program. Given the current focus on accountability, the topic of parent involvement is one worth studying, especially as it may relate to a child's level of achievement in school and as we look for ways to engage parents to help raise the engagement and achievement levels of their children. This chapter describes the research design and why it was selected, the research questions guiding the study, the research methodology, the research sample and the rationale for sample selection, the data gathering procedures, methods of data analysis as well as the reporting of the data, frameworks for discussing the findings, and the limitations of the study.

#### Research Questions

There are four research questions that will be guiding the qualitative study.

1. What are the components of an effective K-2 Parent Involvement Program?
2. In what ways does the initiation and implementation of a K-2 Parent Involvement Program affect teacher practices?
3. How has participation in the project impacted teacher beliefs about parental involvement?
4. What were the challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program?

## Research Hypothesis

This case study was expected to show that the initiation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program would have a positive impact on teacher beliefs and practices such as increased parent communications and outreach efforts. This study was expected to show that the K-2 parent involvement program would increase parental participation in their child's education. The study would also potentially indicate that increased parent involvement had a positive impact on student achievement or benefit students in other ways. There would also be challenges facing the planning and implementation of the K-2 parent involvement program including lack of time, lack of follow through and limited, sustained coordination.

## Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world...In contrast to quantitative research, which takes apart a phenomenon to examine component parts (which become the variables of the study) qualitative research can reveal how all the parts work together to form a whole.

(Merriam, 1998, p.6)

The qualitative case study was purposely selected as a way to explore a specific happening in a school. As this study of a K-2 Parent Involvement Program was focused on one school's journey, at a specific point in time, the qualitative design was most fitting. As Miles and Huberman (1994) state, "We can define a case as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p. 25). Multiple factors and perspectives were

explored throughout the study. Some of these included parent perceptions, teacher beliefs and practices, program goals and implementation strategies, as well as challenges to the program. As Merriam (1998) states, “The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 41).

This study was a case study of a change effort. This study focused on the initiation and implementation of a parent involvement program. According to Fullan (2001):

Most researchers now see three broad phases to the change process. Phase I-variously labeled initiation, mobilization, or adoption-consists of the process that leads up to and includes a decision to adopt or proceed with a change. Phase II-implementation or initial use...involves the first experiences of attempting to put an idea or reform into practice. Phase III-called continuation, incorporation, routinization, or institutionalization-refers to whether the change gets built in as an ongoing part or through attrition. (Fullan, 2001, p. 50).

This study documented the early phases of the initiation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program. As a result of the research questions and study focus, the researcher was interested in collecting data about the process involved. “Questions about process (why or how something happens) commonly guide qualitative research, as do questions of understanding (what happened and what does it mean for those involved)” (Merriam p. 59).

The initiation and implementation of the Parent Involvement Program was facilitated by the project coordinator who was also the researcher. In qualitative research “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam,

1998, p. 7). The researcher investigated and did field work as the primary mode of data collection. These activities are also considered characteristics of qualitative research. “The investigator in qualitative research spends a substantial amount of time in the natural setting of the study, often in intense contact with participants” (Merriam, 1998, p. 8).

### Sample

The study took place in a small rural town, Fletcher, Massachusetts (pseudonym), with a population of approximately 4800 people. The town operates its own school system, which is divided into two grade level buildings; K-6 and 7-12. The kindergarten, first and second grade teachers are housed in the K-6 elementary school which has a population of approximately 385 students. This school had a 96% white student body, a special education population of 17%, and a 29% low income population. At the district level, there was a 16 % special education and a 26% low income population. There was a drop out rate of close to 4 %, with 70% of the graduating class attending college. While the drop out rate was higher than the state average, the number of students going on to college fell close to 10% below the state average. MCAS data indicated that on most assessments the students at the Fletcher Elementary School performed at or above the state average.

According to the United States Census Bureau, the 1999 (most current available data) per capita income in Fletcher was \$20,205 while the State average was \$25, 952. The number of families living in Fletcher, below the poverty level in 1999 was 4.1% as compared to 6.7% at the State level. The Massachusetts Department of Revenue reports that in 2006 the assessed value of a single family home was \$247,293

and the unemployment rate was 6.2 %.

The teacher participants of the study were all K-2 teachers at the Fletcher Elementary School. The program coordinator, who was also the Superintendent and researcher, had her office in the Fletcher Elementary School. The sample participants represented a purposive and convenient sampling in that they were all K-2 teachers at the Fletcher elementary school. In the spring of 2007 the researcher met with all of the K-2 teachers, nine in total, to describe the research study. The researcher explained that the study would be looking at the initiation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement project as well as the program's influence on the teachers. Given the researcher's role as superintendent, she was very clear about the voluntary nature of participation in the study. Potential participants were informed both orally and in writing, of the issues surrounding confidentiality including their ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

In May, 2007 all nine of the K-2 teachers had preliminarily indicated their interest in the study. As of September, 2007 there were only seven teachers who agreed to be involved in the project. The school had experienced a reduction in force of one first grade teacher and an additional first grade teacher felt that she was "stretched too thin" to become involved. One of the seven teachers dropped from the study during the first weeks, making the actual sample, six teachers.

As indicated previously, the small sampling included six teachers, all of whom were women. The researcher was also a woman. The single gender representation was not purposeful, but rather the product of current teacher assignments. The researcher sent out

formal consent forms and established the data collection methods. The data collection methods included surveys, interviews, review of classroom parent involvement logs, and monthly reflection prompts.

The Kindergarten, first and second grade teachers were housed in the elementary school. There were a total of 26 full time teachers who worked at the elementary school. The range in years of teaching experience for the entire elementary school is 3-34, with a mean 17.5 years and a median of 18.5 years. The mean of the sample was almost exactly equal to the mean of the entire teacher staff, while the median was 2.5 years higher when compared to the entire staff. The mean for the total years of experience is 17.3 with a median of 20 years. This indicated that the majority of the teachers in the study had 20 years or more experience. The researcher, who was also the project coordinator, had nine years of teaching experience and 11 years of administrative experience. This administrative experience was as a principal and a superintendent.

**Table 3-1 Sample Teaching Experience**

Sample: Teaching Experience	Mean	Range	Median
Teaching experience at Fletcher (years)	15	9-32	17
Total teaching experience in K-2 In years	16	7-32	17
Total teaching Experience In years	17.3	7-27	20

As Table 3-1 shows, the teachers in the sample had a vast array of teaching experiences.

The level of credentials and degrees varied among the sample. As Table 3-2 shows, all of the teachers had credits beyond their bachelor's degree, and most had more. Table 3- 2

indicates the participants college degree level based on their placement on the salary schedule. The degrees ranged from Bachelors+ 15 to Masters+ 45, which highlighted the wide range of advanced academic credits held by the participants. The table also displays the credential level for all of the teachers at Fletcher Elementary School. As the study was conducted, all members of the sample were involved in curriculum related professional development, which focused on Reading. There was not specific professional development related to parent involvement, beyond the monthly project meetings.

**Table 3-2 Fletcher Staff: Salary Placement**

Degree and Increment	Total # of Fletcher Elementary Staff	% of Total Elementary Staff	# of Sample	% of Sample
Bachelors	0	0	0	0
Bachelors +15	5	18	1	17
Bachelors +30	6	21	2	33
Masters	2	7	0	0
Masters+15	2	7	0	0
Masters +30	2	7	0	0
Masters +45	11	39	3	50

The study was conducted in a year that had a great range in class size. Table 3- 3 lists the classroom teacher and the number of children in each classroom. The significance of the different classroom sizes may have had an effect on the level of data collection, and may therefore be considered a limitation of the study.

**Table 3-3**  
**Sample classroom size**

<b>Sample Classroom</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>	<b>Sample Classroom</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>
K-a	18	1-a	24
K-b	19	2-a	19
K-c	12	2-b	21

### Pilot Test

The pilot test of the interview questions, surveys and classroom logs was done with the assistance of the Director of Pupil and Academic Services. The Director supervises Special Education as well as Early Childhood Education. She participated by reviewing the actual data collection tools and by giving feedback to the researcher. The Director was asked to review the data collection tools for clarity and content. The data tools were also reviewed by an interested classroom teacher from another district. Suggestions were incorporated into the final set of interview questions, survey questions, and classroom logs used in the study. Once suggestions were incorporated into the data collection tools all of the instruments were tested on the Director and the teacher. All data collection instruments were also subject to a peer review (Superintendent and Principals) as well as an expert review (College Professor).

### Data Gathering Procedures

In this case study, the researcher utilized a number of different data collection methods. This data was collected in one school over a period of six months. In

qualitative research, “data collection activities typically are carried out in close proximity to a local setting for a sustained period of time” (Miles and Huberman, 1994 p. 9).

A variety of data gathering methods were used as a way to capture the best description of what was happening with regard to the parent involvement program. The data collection methods included surveys, interviews, parent involvement logs, and monthly teacher reflection prompts.

Qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data. Humans are best suited for this task, especially because interviewing, observing, and analyzing are activities central to qualitative research. (Merriam, 1998, p. 1)

These collection methods were selected because they allowed for a diverse representation of information, from both staff and parents. The methods also allowed for more continuous data gathering throughout the project and triangulation of the study data.

The data from this qualitative case study was collected in order to document the initiation and implementation of a K-2 Parent Involvement program in a small, rural school district. The researcher was looking at the factors that may support or challenge this program. “Case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, for evaluating programs, and for improving policy” (Merriam, 1998, p.41). Data was collected by both the researcher as well as the staff participants. The researcher outlined the data collection methodology with all participants. The qualitative study was selected as a way to present data that was “comprehensive, holistic, expansive, and richly descriptive” (Merriam, p. 9).

The data generated during the study was collected using the following Techniques:

- (A). Pre and post intervention semi-structured interviews about parent involvement were given to the participant teachers involved in the study. These questions were created by the researcher.
- (B). Parent Involvement Surveys were given to the participant teachers before the start of the project.
- (C). Teacher specific classroom logs were kept throughout the study. These specified types and instances of parent involvement as well as who initiated the activities.
- (D). Teacher monthly reflection sheets allowed staff to respond to prompts or to provide their own reflections about the project.

The data was collected from a variety of sources as a way to support the triangulation of the data. “In terms of using multiple methods of data collection and analysis, triangulation strengthens reliability as well as internal validity” (Merriam, p. 207).

#### Interviews:

The teachers working in the study were interviewed both before and after the project. The questions were focused on their beliefs about the current parent involvement program, parent involvement in general as well as their ideas about ways to improve parent involvement. These were semi structured interviews that were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were done by a third party, not involved in the study.

### Parent Involvement Surveys:

The study participants were given a survey before the beginning of the project. This survey allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the current teacher beliefs about parent involvement.

### Teacher Classroom Parent Involvement Logs:

The teachers collected data regarding all classroom parent involvement activities. The log of classroom parent involvement activities focused on four specific types of parent involvement. These were four of the six types defined by Dr. Joyce Epstein of John Hopkins University. Dr. Epstein, Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at the University has spent over two decades working in the area of family involvement. She describes parent involvement as falling into six general categories. They are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaboration with community (Epstein, 2002). For the purposes of this study, the classroom teachers collected data only on the first four types of involvement. Teachers met with the researcher before the data collection began to clarify the definitions and examples of what type of information would be collected. Teachers used the logs to document the specific types of activity, in which category the activity best fits, the outreach that was used to communicate with parents (email, flyers home, notes in agendas) as well as any communication that existed from parent and home to the classroom. The logs also were used to document whether the parent involvement activity was teacher or parent initiated.

### Monthly Reflection Sheets:

The teachers in the study responded to prompts (on monthly reflection sheets) about their work in the classroom; regarding parent involvement. The teachers were asked to write once a month as a way of summarizing their experiences. They were also invited to write thoughts, ideas or reflections as often as they wanted and were invited to include any of their own feelings and thoughts. These prompts were copied and submitted to the researcher on a monthly basis. The teachers were asked to reflect on how their thinking on parent involvement had evolved during their participation in the study as well as what they observed from their interactions with parents or students. The reflections were written at the end of the month and were submitted after the monthly group meeting and discussion regarding the project.

### Method of Data Analysis

In this qualitative study, the researcher used the four guiding research questions as the framework for all data analysis. Data collection and analysis was ongoing throughout the duration of the study.

Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research.

Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read. Emerging insights, hunches, and tentative hypotheses direct the next phase of data collection which in turn leads to the refinement or reformulation of questions and so on. It is an interactive process throughout that allows the investigator to produce believable and trustworthy findings. (Merriam, 1998, p. 151).

Before the analysis could occur, a system of organizing the data was established.

The primary method of organization involved coding the data. “Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of data.” (Merriam, 1998, p. 164) The coding allowed researcher to organize the data before the analysis began.

The analysis of qualitative data can range from organizing a narrative description of the phenomenon, to constructing categories or themes that cut across the data, to building theory. Each of these levels of analysis calls upon the investigator’s intuitive as well as analytical powers. The process can certainly be enhanced by employing techniques that have helped others, such as using data displays, as well as devising a systemic approach to the task. (Merriam, 1998, p. 196).

Data analysis methods include reviewing for themes, review of data for patterns and relationships, transcriptions, tallying, and categorizing data for documentation purposes. The researcher will be asking a colleague to provide a *data audit* to ensure that all the collected data has been coded and transcribed correctly. The goal of this third party check was to protect against researcher bias. “Additional strategies, including triangulation of data and member checks, will also be used as a way to enhance internal validity” (Merriam, 1998, p. 204).

The pre study interviews of the participants were recorded and then sent to a third party for transcription. The post interviews were recorded by hand. Once they have been transcribed and member checked, they were coded. Responses to the staff surveys were tallied and coded around various themes and constructs.

At the outset of a qualitative study, the investigator knows what the problem is and has selected a sample to collect data in order to address the problem. But the

researcher does not know what will be discovered, what or whom to concentrate on, or what the final analysis will be like. (Merriam, p. 162)

The parent involvement data that was logged by the individual classroom teachers were coded by category. Themes and patterns of involvement and initiation were analyzed. The monthly reflection prompts were coded by themes and patterns as well.

#### Formats for Reporting the Data

Appropriate data display helped the researcher present information in a clear manner. “For qualitative researchers, the typical mode of display has been extended, unreduced text, usually in the form of written up field notes, which the analyst scans through, attaching codes and then extracting coded segments and drawing conclusions” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 91). Miles and Huberman (1994) also state, this type of data may be bulky, weak or cumbersome. (p. 91). They suggest that the researcher use “displays that are focused enough to permit a viewing of a full data set in the same location, and our arranged systemically to answer the research questions at hand.” (p. 91)

As a way to clearly display the information, the researcher will be incorporating various formats. These primarily included presenting information in narrative, table, and matrix format. The data was displayed and discussed by research question. The results of parent involvement logs were presented in a narrative and matrix form. The survey results and transcribed texts of the research participant pre and post interviews were also presented in narrative forms. Data was presented in a chronological order as a way to frame changes in participant beliefs and behavior. As the actual data was collected, the researcher needed to modify the display modes to present the information most clearly.

## Frameworks for Discussing the Findings

The data collected in the study provided an understanding of how one school participated in the initiation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program. The planning of the study and creation of the research questions followed an analysis of current literature on parent involvement. A detailed description of this literature was presented in Chapter 2. The data was collected from the perspective of teachers and parents. There were four guiding research questions that highlighted changes in teacher beliefs and behaviors, the components of an effective K-2 parent involvement program, and challenges that were faced during the data collection period. This data was analyzed, displayed, and discussed with regard to the implications of the findings. Chapter 4 discusses the data collected and findings of the study. Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the findings and research as well as possible suggestions for further study of this topic.

## Limitations of the Study

There were a number of limitations of the study. These limitations included the small sample size, the unique demographic of the study site, the potential for researcher or participant bias, instrumentation, and the short duration of the study.

Given that the study was conducted with six teachers in a small rural school district, it is possible that the findings were not generalizable to other districts looking to create a K-2 parent involvement program. This lack of generalizability is a threat to external validity (Merriam, 1998).

An additional limitation was related to the project coordinator's role as superintendent. The study participants were given all study goals and data collection

information at the start of the study as well information regarding confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the study. Every effort was made to ensure teachers that they did not feel pressured into agreeing to be part of the study. However, “ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to the collection of data and in the dissemination of findings. Overlaying both the collection of data and the dissemination of findings is the researcher-participant relationship” (Merriam, p. 213).

Researcher bias was also be considered a limitation of the study. As the researcher spent time reviewing literature and establishing the study methodology, it was possible that the researcher interpreted data in such a way as to support the original hypotheses. As a way to protect against this, and enhance internal validity, Merriam (1998) suggests that there are some basic strategies that can be employed (p. 204). The researcher used triangulation, member checks, and peer examination as a way to mitigate researcher bias.

Participant bias was also considered a limitation. Since much of the data was collected by teachers who are documenting events in their own classrooms, there was potential for the teachers to want the data to indicate only successful activities. The researcher continued to remind the participants that the data collected was confidential.

“Instrumentation may also be a limitation and threat to internal validity” (Gay, 2006, p. 239). All data collection instruments were researcher created. As a way to minimize this limitation, all data collection tools were peer reviewed, piloted and tested. A final limitation related to the timetable of the data collection. The study included data collected over a six month period, in one particular school year.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

This qualitative case study focused on K-2 Parent Involvement in a small rural elementary school. It was designed to review the types of parent involvement that occur over time and to identify the most effective forms of parent involvement. The study also investigated specific teacher beliefs and behaviors related to parent involvement and documented any changes in these beliefs and behaviors as a result of being in the study. A final review of challenges to parent involvement was documented. The research questions for the study were:

1. What are the components of an effective K-2 parent involvement program?
2. In what ways does the initiation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program affect teacher practices?
3. How has participation in the project impacted teacher beliefs about parental involvement?
4. What were the challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program?

This chapter presents the findings of the study using a number of data sources including staff surveys and interviews, classroom parent involvement logs, teacher written reflections based on monthly prompts, and post project interviews. The findings will be presented by research question and chronologically based on themes and patterns that have emerged following the data analysis. A description of the site, the teacher participants, and the parent involvement paradigm used in the study will be included in chapter four. Chapter five will discuss a summary of the findings, a discussion of the

findings, the limitations of the study, and a discussion of the implications of the study as they relate to policy, practice, and future research. Chapter five will also include a section on the researcher's leadership reflections.

### Site Description

The Fletcher Elementary school is a K-6 school in a small New England town with approximately 4800 people. The school itself has an enrollment of 385 children, with 156 of the students assigned in Kindergarten, first, and second grade. The town may be considered to have a number of rural elements including limited local employment options, no public transportation, a drop out rate that is higher than the state average, and a per capita income that is below the state average. Information provided by many parents and staff indicate that parent involvement is something to be valued but that may be occurring only sporadically or more in some classrooms than others. Prior to this study, there was no formal school or district parent involvement program.

While the school is considered small, there is a variety of class sizes at each grade level. Table 4- 1 displays the number of students in each of the K-2 sample classrooms at Fletcher Elementary.

**Table 4-1 Sample classroom size with teacher names**

K-Hayes	18
K-Brown	19
K-Adams	12
1-Smith	24
2-Hunter	21
2-Early	19

As previously indicated, there was a variety of parent involvement initiatives occurring but not in any uniform manner or with any regularity. Some classrooms had more parent involvement than others. Class size could have been a factor in the amount of parent involvement that occurred in each classroom.

### **Participant Description**

*All participants' names, first or last, are pseudonyms.*

**Mrs. Hayes:** Mrs. Hayes is a Kindergarten teacher with 22 years of experience. She has taught kindergarten, grade 1, and 2 and has worked in more than one school system. She feels that parent involvement is important at all grade levels and that parent involvement supports a child's academic achievement and pro social development.

**Mrs. Brown:** Mrs. Brown is a kindergarten teacher with 18 years of experience. She has taught preschool through grade 2 and has worked in more than one school system. She feels that parent involvement is important at all grade levels and that parent involvement supports a child's academic achievement and pro social development.

**Mrs. Adams:** Mrs. Adams is a kindergarten teacher with nine years of experience. Her only experience is at the Fletcher Elementary school. She feels that parent involvement is important at all grade levels and that parent involvement supports a child's academic achievement and pro social development.

**Mrs. Smith:** Mrs. Smith is a grade 1 teacher with 33 years of experience. She has taught grade 1, 2 and 4 in two different school systems. She feels that parent involvement is most important at the primary level and that parent involvement supports a child's academic achievement and pro social development.

**Mrs. Hunter:** Mrs., Hunter is a grade 2 teacher with 35 years of experience. She has taught in more than one system but has spent 28 years at the Fletcher Elementary School. She feels that parent involvement is important at all grade levels and that parent involvement supports a child’s academic achievement and pro social development.

**Mrs. Early:** Mrs. Early is a grade two teacher with 25 years of experience. She has taught grades 1 and 2 in more than one school system. She feels that parent involvement is important at all grade levels and that parent involvement supports a child’s academic achievement and pro social development.

The participants in the study have a wide variety of experience as well as a variety of academic training. The participants did not receive any professional development related to parent involvement prior to the study. Table 4-2 displays the participant’s level of academic credentials.

**Table 4-2 Sample Academic Credentials on Scale**

Degree and Increment	# of Sample	% of Sample
Bachelors	0	0
Bachelors +15 credits	2	33
Bachelors +30 credits	1	17
Masters	0	0
Masters+15 credits	0	0
Masters +30 credits	0	0
Masters +45 credits	3	50

## **Parent Involvement Descriptions**

As research indicates, there is no one specific definition of parent involvement. The researcher and teacher participants met at the beginning of the study to discuss and clarify definitions, as they played an important role in much of the data gathering at the classroom level. The following definitions were used by all during the course of the study.

**Parent Involvement**: Home based or school based activities that are linked or related to a child's learning at school (Adapted from Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997).

**Parenting**: Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families (Epstein, 1995).

**Communicating**: Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications (Epstein, 1995).

**Volunteering**: Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs (Epstein, 1995).

**Learning at home**: Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions (Epstein, 1995).

## *Findings*

### ***1. What are the components of an effective K-2 parent involvement program?***

Staff Surveys: Before the start of the study the K-2 participant teachers were given a general survey regarding parent involvement. The survey sought to capture their own experience with parent involvement as well as to activate their thinking around the subject. There were a number of themes that emerged when the participants were asked about their own beliefs regarding parent involvement and what positive parent involvement may look like. A primary theme that seemed to be present, though stated in different ways was that when parents and the teacher work together, it is a positive experience for all involved. Mrs. Hayes stated that “most of her experiences had been great” and parents “had volunteered in the classroom, made donations, and helped with specific activities.” Mrs. Brown felt that “parents are unaware of what they should be working on and that several times we have been able to catch children right up once we all got on the same track.” Mrs. Adams stated that “I use parents in my classroom at center time. It helps the parent to see how things are done in kindergarten.” Mrs. Smith said that “when parents work as a team with the classroom teacher students see the importance not only of academics, but social issues.” Mrs. Hunter had experienced positive parent involvement that included “classroom volunteers-assisting students, and leading guided reading groups.” Mrs. Early stated she felt “meeting and greeting parents very early in the year by phone calls, class newsletters or an ice cream social” was positive.

The teachers were all able to describe a number of specific experiences with parent involvement in the past. What was interesting was that each teacher described a situation that was unique to their own classroom. While three of the teachers described acts of volunteering, two highlighted learning at home activities and one discussed the communicating form of parent involvement. The teachers were also given the opportunity to cite any negative parent involvement activities that they experienced. All six of the teachers have had at least one situation that they classified as negative. Interestingly five of the six teachers characterized this experience as a parent becoming involved to promote a “personal or hidden agenda” which ultimately turned into a negative experience for all involved, often including the student.

Another aspect of the survey asked the teachers if they felt there were connections between specific parent involvement activities and student achievement. While the study did not review the connection between student achievement and parent involvement per say, it can certainly be argued that one of the primary reasons parent involvement is encouraged is due to the belief that it will positively impact students in some way.

The questions focused specifically on what the teachers believed were acts that a parent would do to help support the achievement of their child. The teachers were all in agreement that monitoring a child’s homework and attending parent-teacher meetings would be beneficial to a student’s achievement. Five of the teachers believed that attending school events where a child was participating, attending school events with their child, having conversations about topics being studied in school, and taking a child on educational outings would benefit student achievement.

Mrs. Early wrote, “As a teacher I am the cake of the child’s education, but parents need to supplement and be the frosting of the child’s education.” Mrs. Brown felt that “sitting around the table for breakfast and supper and engaging in conversation with family members” would also help support student achievement. The theme that emanated from this data was that the classroom teachers believe that most any type of interaction related to school, between parent and child, would benefit student achievement.

As a way to gather data regarding the types of school to home communication that existed, the participants were asked to name any communications that were used at the Fletcher Elementary School. While none of the six teachers listed the exact same forms of communication, there were a number of items that were mentioned by at least four of the participants. The most common responses were the agenda book, newsletters from both the school and classroom and parent-teacher conferences. Two teachers referenced the school website and two different teachers mentioned telephone conversations. The data indicated that while each teacher may communicate to the home through varying mechanisms, there was a strong interest in connecting the classroom and school to the parent.

Once these elements of communication were identified, the teachers were asked to highlight which type they believed was most beneficial to student achievement. Mrs. Hayes felt that “the agenda books were beneficial because parents can write notes to the school and teachers can contact parents as needed.” Mrs. Brown also mentioned the agenda books as a way for “teachers and parents to communicate directly.” Two of the teachers, Mrs. Hunter and Mrs. Early, felt that phone conversations or meeting

with parents was the best way to communicate. Mrs. Hunter stated, “Phone conversations or parent meetings provide direct communication and are more personable” while Mrs. Early believes “meeting with parents one to one” is most beneficial, specifically because “everyone likes to hear good things about their child. It makes it easier if you have to say something negative later.” The pattern of all responses indicated that the teachers felt comfortable with communicating to parents directly and that they believe it is important; however they feel differently about which is the “most effective” mechanism to do this.

An additional question posing what types of parent involvement or school to home communication the teachers would like to initiate, allowed the researcher to connect the participant’s current beliefs or practices to their vision for improved parent involvement. Three of the six teachers felt that email addresses or other electronic communications would be very helpful; two of these three also believed teacher websites would be helpful for parents. The other two responses were related to connecting parents and guardians to the actual school day. Mrs. Hunter stated that she would like “parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. volunteering to have breakfast with children in the cafeteria” and Mrs. Smith stated, “Somehow I’d love to have parent’s see a typical daily routine.” All of the teacher input indicated that there were components of a parent involvement program that were either missing or that could be enhanced somehow.

A final opportunity was provided to elaborate on any topics related to an effective parent involvement program. Only two teachers responded to this opportunity with one of them focusing on academics and the other focusing on school climate. Mrs.

Adams said “I would like to see something done about children entering kindergarten. A lot of parents don’t understand what readiness skills their child should have before entering kindergarten.” Mrs. Early responded by stating “we have come a long way in the last few years, but we need to continue to foster an open, positive, and courteous atmosphere”.

The survey data provided a great deal of information about the current thinking and practices of teachers related to parent involvement at Fletcher. It also allowed for the individual participants to reflect on their own beliefs about effective parent involvement and to connect these beliefs to their own classroom work. The researcher could clearly identify a few major themes that blossomed from the data. It was apparent that all of the teachers believe they know what is needed for an effective parent involvement program. They also all felt that communication was a key to any parent involvement program. There is also a common consensus that a strong parent involvement program, or at least specific elements of a program, will have a positive effect on students and student achievement.

*Staff Pre Interviews:*

In early October, 2007 the participants were given a pre- interview. They were all asked the same semi structured questions, but they were free to elaborate on any topics related to the question. As a result of this, in some cases the researcher may have asked additional questions as a way to allow the teacher to follow through with a thought. The interview questions were formulated by the researcher as a way to discover the feelings that each teacher had about parent involvement. The questions were also written as a way to assess baseline perceptions about parent involvement

currently occurring in their classroom and in the larger school community. The teachers were asked 10 questions and were free to talk about any related issue they wanted. If it was important enough for them to interject additional information, than the researcher recorded the data.

A number of themes and patterns emerged from the interviews. Four of them specifically related to effective components of a K-2 parent involvement program. It was clear that most of the participants felt that (1) *communication*, (2) *providing a comfortable and welcoming environment*, (3) *informing parents about what they should expect from the classroom or grade level curriculum*, and (4) *providing workshops highlighting the importance of parent involvement and offering ideas and strategies to help parents become more involved* were important components of a parent involvement program.

#### Communication:

There is no question that clear and open communication was considered to be one of the most important elements of a parent involvement program. This data served to buttress similar findings from the teacher surveys. Mrs. Adams stated that,

I do a lot of writing in the agenda books and writing little notes back and forth.

At the beginning of every year, I say here is what you should do if you have any problems. We have an open door policy. Call us and I can call you back when I have a few minutes. Parents love that. They want to feel like they are a part if it.

Mrs. Adams also referenced communication as it relates to the overall functioning of the school. She noted, “The more we get the parents in here, the better, and the more informed they will be.”

Mrs. Smith felt that communication to the parent and the home were significant elements of a program. She referenced communication packets that were sent home, on a weekly basis, by the school as “fostering cohesiveness.” She believed that, “parents need to know what they could be involved in, what the school needs, and what the school is open to.” Additionally, Mrs. Hayes believed that family newsletters would help with communication.

Mrs. Hunter also cited the importance of communication. She believed this communication actually should occur beyond the classroom walls. She stated,

Staff and administration are trying to have a home-school connection; communication between home and school. Trying to keep it all positive and make sure that the parents out there and the community as a whole are developing a good impression of some of the things that are happening in the school. Trying to make the parents, family, community and the school all a part of it.

This notion of extending communication to the larger community was mentioned by other teachers. Their feeling was that a new parent to town may get a first impression of what the school believes or encourages from people outside of the formal school community and that information provided to other parents and community members could help send a positive message about involvement and the school in general.

Additionally, Mrs. Hunter believed that better outreach to parents would help encourage them to become more active in school related activities. She stated, “We have a newsletter and we are trying to reach them (the parents) that way. We try to keep them informed and to keep the communication there. In terms of getting them more involved in school, I think we need to do more there.”

Communication was also a topic elaborated on by Mrs. Early. While the interview questions were general in nature and covered topics such as elements of parent involvement, being a new parent to town, and what teachers believed parent involvement included or meant Mrs. Early focused many of her answers on the link between communication and parent involvement. She stated very simply, that “It is crucial that you have good communication with parents. I think that the staff [each of us] has a way of communicating with parents; by phone, by the newsletter, or by being in someone’s hair shop and saying-you know what, he had a really good day.” She went on to say,

If you just write a little note saying thanks so much for the glue sticks they are terrific or we really enjoyed the cupcakes today, and thank you so much for volunteering at the apple orchard or thank you so much for this, I think the connection you make is important. I think if you write back and say he really enjoyed something so that it can go both ways and once you have established the communication from your end, it is very easy for a mom to say, Martha, he really loves it-keep that communication open so that they feel open to you. It is really important for them to feel open to you.

The participants all spoke about communication and the need for it in order to effectively engage parents. Some of the teachers went on, in great detail, to explain why they thought it was important while others used the subject of good communication as a way to speak about the need for the classroom teacher, the administration, and the school to welcome parents and to make sure they feel comfortable when they are in the school. This was the second theme to emerge from the data analysis.

### Providing a Comfortable and Welcoming Environment:

When the participants were interviewed many of them made reference to the importance of making parents feel comfortable and welcome. The significance of this data may lie in the fact that the questions were more geared towards potential strengths of a program or concrete elements of a parent involvement program. This data provided the researcher with a better understanding of the teacher perspective as it related to the more “affective” or interpersonal components of a program. This data may also support the earlier findings that suggest parents who feel comfortable in a classroom will have a positive impact as they perform volunteer activities and that teachers who create a welcoming environment have more success with parents.

Mrs. Brown, who teaches kindergarten, had some concerns around the readiness of some children. This was apparent to the researcher, as she seemed to mention it in almost every answer. She did feel that having parents in the room to help with specific tasks make for a good situation. She also discussed some parents not being knowledgeable about “school” to the point where they may feel intimidated to either volunteer or to even ask questions. Creating a positive environment would help in this quest. Mrs. Hayes felt that parents are encouraged to volunteer or become involved in other ways, and that the PTA serves to welcome any parents.

Mrs. Adams was very candid in her responses to the interview questions, especially as they related to creating a welcoming environment. She stated, “I have always welcomed parents. Other teachers have warned me that I may get a parent with their own agenda. My thing is that if you are doing your job to the best of your ability than what can a parent say that is wrong with you? Up to now it has always worked out.” She also felt

there was a need for the school behavior where “a person lets parents come into the classroom and the principal welcomes them.” Her belief indicated that the more families are involved with the school, the better for the child. “I have grandparents and parents coming in and it works very well. I would like to see more teachers letting adults into their classrooms to show how you do things and they see what the children do and that would definitely help.” She believed if parents are welcomed and come into the classroom “than it is a good thing because they see how you teach and then they try to do it with their children at home.”

Mrs. Smith identified herself as someone “who has been doing this for a long time.” She informed the researcher that she knows “there are some teachers who are very open and very welcoming to the parent and that there are others who feel threatened.” The statement presented an interesting perspective, as it served to highlight that some teachers have concerns about letting parents in the room. This data also served as a validation of the survey findings which indicated that a number of teachers have had negative parent involvement experiences. Most of the participants referred to issues of confidentiality and a need to protect students from “gossiping” by parents. This may be seen as a detriment to a fully welcoming environment in a classroom; it is concern for the children that keeps teachers wanting to limit access to their class. Mrs. Smith continued to discuss her own desire to welcome parents into her class. She stated, “Parents need to feel welcome. When they walk into your room, they need to feel that it’s ok for them to be there. I know it is hard when you are teaching and all of a sudden someone is at the door and you need to make them feel like it is perfectly alright.”

Mrs. Hunter believed that a welcoming classroom is also an important part of parent involvement. She made the connection between creating a positive environment and teaching the curriculum. She highlighted a presentation she did the previous year and how offering the workshop itself would be inviting. “I think again making parents feel welcome and feel good that they are in the school system. The physical appearance of the school and the personal connections set the stage. We need to make sure they feel comfortable when they walk into the school.”

Creating an environment that is welcoming was also mentioned by Mrs. Early. Regarding how she interacts with parents of the children in her classroom, she commented “It is crucial that you talk to them as people and that they love you right away. You must show that you are nice and kind, and explain everything very well.” She explained that she has come to this understanding after years of teaching. She wanted to be sure that parents know how much she values working with their children. “Personally I have gotten older and more mature; I’m learning more. I am finding that Martha is more accessible and not Mrs. Early. If you sign your first name, Martha, you are more accessible.” She believes that you are able to work more effectively with the parents if you, as the teacher, can make a personal connection.

While the participant interviews illuminated the need for creating a comfortable and welcoming environment, many of them also felt that informing parents about what they should expect from the classroom or grade level curriculum would be an important element of a parent involvement program.

### What Parents Should Expect From the Classroom or Grade Level Curriculum:

Regardless of the grade level taught, all the teacher participants indicated that if a parent involvement program was to be effective, it would need to include a way to inform parents about the “academic” expectations of the grade. While the theme was apparent for all grades, it was most significantly referenced by the kindergarten teachers. There was no doubt that being the first formal grade at the school impacts the teacher feelings about the readiness of children.

Mrs. Brown believed that parents need to know what the readiness expectation is for kindergarten. She believes that this is the responsibility of the school, as she knows many parents “come to meet them on parent’s night or the first day of school that don’t have a lot of information about what they should be looking for.” She stated, “I would really love to grab parents when the kids were three years old and say you don’t have to have this done tomorrow, but before your child comes to kindergarten practice the colors and make sure they can write their name.” She spoke, in particular, to the disparity in children’s prior knowledge regarding things as basic as sounds and letters. She said she would like to “reach these parents ahead of time” so that she can inform them of what is needed in order to help the child be ready to progress fully in kindergarten.

Mrs. Hayes also discussed the need to inform parents about “curriculum information and grade level expectations.” She felt this would help parents understand what they need to know in order to help their child be successful in school.

The concept of readiness and educating parents to the curriculum was also discussed in Mrs. Adams’ interview. She stated, “Parents need to know what we expect for a kindergarten ready child. Parents come in and say “I didn’t know they needed to know

that”. Some don’t know their name and address.” She is frustrated by this and thinks the school could do more.

The teachers of grades one and two were also interested in having parents know what the academic program is for their child. The pattern that emerged was that the teachers have individual stories about working with a parent or two to help their child either “catch up” on missed information or to give them guidance about how to help support the grade level learning activities. Mrs. Smith commented, “I had a student last year who did not know her letters at the beginning of the year and by the end of the year the student was reading. I worked with the parent and that parent made my year because you can see what the difference is.” She also commented “You can have a child who is extremely ready for the classroom and if the parent is willing to do the extended part of it, that child can grow by leaps and bounds.”

Mrs. Hunter felt that “parents need more exposure with what we are teaching their children. Some teachers and I did a presentation last year and we need to do more of that.” Mrs. Early also described the need for helping parents to understand the curriculum that is being taught. She elaborated on a meeting that some of her parents went to that discussed reading comprehension. She said that was helpful because they learned about reading and as they are reading with their child, they are able to “ask those types of questions.” She believed topics such as this are things that parents do not know about. “I think that parents don’t know and people in business might not know. Some of the people who teach 9<sup>th</sup> grade might not know.” Her point was reiterated by others who were not assuming that only certain parents did not know, but that people outside of the primary

grade teaching did not know what curriculum was being taught. Mrs. Early also indicated that she sends home, via newsletter, what they are working on in math and reading.

The researcher heard from all of the participants, in one way or another, that information regarding what is being taught is considered an important element of a parent involvement program. This theme almost naturally connected to the final concept that emerged which was providing workshops highlighting the importance of parent involvement and offering ideas and strategies to help parents become more involved.

#### Provide Workshops About and Strategies for Parents to Become Involved:

The idea that parents would need some assistance in identifying the need for involvement as well as possible training or suggestions for ways to get involved was also a theme that emanated from a number of interviews. The researcher noted that many of the teachers identified this need and felt that it would be important to any parent involvement program. When asked what she thought may assist parent involvement, Mrs. Brown stated, “We can tell parents early and get them involved. I think the parent thinks that parent involvement means that parents come into the classroom helping. I think they need to realize how much more they can do at home.” She believed the school should be responsible to initiating this initial connection. She stated that we need “programs that can tell them what to look for and what not to worry about. There should be more opportunities to help educate parents with how to get their children ready for school and what to be watching for and how we can help them.” Additionally she felt that “parents are interested in learning” but that “there is not a lot of structure for it right now.” Mrs. Brown believed that the early age of the students allows for a unique opportunity to activate parent involvement. “I think that for children, especially 5 and 6 year olds,

anything that is important to adults is important to them.” Mrs. Brown also expressed a desire to use the school website more; as a way to educate parents and to connect school to home. She suggested the teachers could post games for parents and children to do together at home.

Mrs. Adams also indicated that parents knowing what to do can be helpful to the children. She stated, “The parents need to show that school is important for the kids to get it.” She also noted that “sometimes it is just showing them how to read a story, but some people just don’t get that.” There was a sense of frustration to her answers as it was obvious to the researcher that she felt teaching parents was important but that perhaps the school has not done this. Mrs. Smith also cited a need to help parents learn about parent involvement. She described a frustration with homework and how some parents see this as an extra burden. She thinks homework is part of parent involvement and that parents need to view it as a connection to their child’s classroom.

The analysis of the pre interview data indicated a number of important findings for the researcher. Communication was considered by all to be a key component to a parent involvement program. This information validated the participant survey data which also highlights this as a significant program element. Additional findings generated from the interviews spoke to the need to welcome parents and to support their own learning about curriculum expectations and strategies to help increase involvement. These findings also serve to dovetail the survey findings which described the need for teachers and parents to work together and for parents to connect their home activities, including working together on homework, with the child’s school day subjects, routines, or expectations. A number of the participants discussed volunteering in the classroom as a positive way to

get needed support to children but also as a way to show parents what is happening in the school. This theme of positive volunteering experiences also emerged from the survey data. What came out strongly in the interviews, but less so in the surveys, was the idea of having a welcoming and inviting classroom and school climate. The next analysis of data will be based on the classroom parent involvement logs that were used as a way to document ongoing parent involvement by the individual classroom teachers.

Classroom Parent Involvement Logs:

The teacher participants were asked to document the parent involvement activity that occurred in their classrooms from November 2007 through April 2008. The activity would be classified as Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering or Learning at Home. These definitions and descriptions were outlined and discussed with the participants prior to the start of the study. Teachers were free to classify the parent involvement activity in more than one category if it was appropriate. The teachers also documented whether the parent involvement was teacher initiated, parent initiated, or shared (both).

**Mrs. Hayes, Kindergarten**

Mrs. Hayes documented 253 instances of parent involvement during the project. Table 4-3 displays the data captured from her classroom log. Forty of the instances were documents or information that was given out to the entire class, and not just to an individual student. These were in the forms of newsletters and informational packets sent to parents.

**Table 4-3 Total Parent Involvement by category-Hayes**

	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>13</b>

The majority of Mrs. Hayes' parent involvement fell into the categories of Communicating or Parenting but she did have activity in all four categories. These activities ranged from daily notes back and forth to parents, communications regarding schedules, curriculum and assessment related information, behavioral concerns, class and school newsletters, and activities involving volunteers. Mrs. Hayes also had the greatest percent of Learning at Home parent involvement amongst all the participants. There was a wide array of topics embedded in the parent involvement activities and Mrs. Hayes individually communicated with the parents of all the children in her class at least once during the year.

**Mrs. Brown, Kindergarten**

Mrs. Brown documented 170 instances of parent involvement during the project. Table 4-4 displays the data captured from her log. Three of the instances were cited as whole class parent involvement activities and these were all newsletters.

**Table 4-4 Total Parent Involvement by category-Brown**

	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>29</b>

All but one of Mrs. Browns' parent involvements appeared in the Communicating category. They were primarily in the form of agenda notes back and forth to parents. In most instances Mrs. Brown did not identify what the subject of the communication was; however there were a number of instances that did reference meetings between the teacher and parent. Mrs. Brown individually communicated with the parents of all the children in her class many times during the year.

### **Mrs. Adams, Kindergarten**

Mrs. Adams documented 87 instances of parent involvement during the project. Table 4-5 displays the data from her classroom. Twenty one of the instances were noted as whole class parent involvement activities. These were in the form of newsletters, communication packets, or home learning activities.

**Table 4-5 Total Parent Involvement by category-Adams**

	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>12</b>

Mrs. Adams had activities in all of the categories, with the majority of them classified in the Communicating column. These communications included agenda notes and phone calls regarding daily schedules and happenings, medical issues, student behavior, curriculum, and assessment activities. Mrs. Adams individually communicated with the parents of her students at least once during the year. There were a number of parents that she communicated with on a far more regular basis than others.

### **Mrs. Smith, Grade 1**

Mrs. Smith documented 206 instances of parent involvement in her classroom. Seventeen of the instances were noted as whole class communications and were in the form of a newsletter or curriculum overview. Table 4- 6 displays the data from Mrs. Smith's classroom log.

**Table 4- 6 Total Parent Involvement by category-Smith**

	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>3</b>

The majority of the parent involvement activities occurring in Mrs. Smith's classroom were categorized as Communicating activities. These were described by the participant as

notes or calls to and from the family regarding daily school or home scheduled activities, academic questions, and behavioral or medical issues. While there were activities in all categories, Learning at Home also represented 22% of the occurrences. Mrs. Smith individually communicated at least once with all of the parents of her students. There were, however, 3-4 parents whom she communicated with on a far more regular basis.

**Mrs. Hunter, Grade 2**

Mrs. Hunter documented 243 instances of parent involvement. Five of these were communications to the parents of all children in her class. These were newsletters, assessment documents or notes regarding whole class activities. Table 4- 7 displays the data collected from Mrs. Hunter’s classroom.

**Table 4-7 Total Parent Involvement by category-Hunter**

	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>0</b>

Nearly all of Mrs. Hunter’s parent involvement was categorized as Communicating, with the second most common form being Learning at Home. The communicating parent involvement included calls and agenda notes regarding classroom occurrences, academic updates, behavioral issues, and daily schedule or routine issues. Mrs. Hunter also noted a number of “positive” notes or calls she made to parents. Mrs. Hunter individually communicated with the parents of all her students. There were a few students who received a great deal of communicating between the classroom and the home.

## Mrs. Early, Grade 2

Mrs. Early documented 85 instances of parent involvement. Table 4- 8 displays the breakout of the data collected. Six of the activities were whole class communications in the form of a newsletter, or communication regarding a class activity.

**Table 4- 8 Total Parent Involvement by category-Early**

	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>1</b>

The predominant form of parent involvement documented by Mrs. Early was Communicating, with only one other activity classified as Parenting. The Communicating parent involvement noted a variety of communications including notes and phone calls regarding behavior, academic issues, schedule changes and positive occurrences. Mrs. Early individually communicated with the parents of all her students at least once during the year. There were, however, a few students who received the majority of the communication.

An analysis of all the classroom log data surfaced a number of themes and patterns related to the components of an effective parent involvement program. It was clear that the most common form of parent involvement used in the Fletcher Elementary School sample classrooms was Communicating. Out of 1044 documented instances of parent involvement, 1004, or 96% were classified by the teachers as Communicating. This data served to reinforce the earlier findings that indicated the teacher participants believed that communication was a significant component of parent involvement. The second most common form of parent involvement that occurred in all classrooms was Learning at Home. This type of parent involvement occurred 176 times, or 17%. Mrs. Hayes did have parenting activities 181 times, but given the low total in all the other classrooms for this

type, it appeared to be more classroom specific than a pattern generating from all the data.

The Learning at Home finding dovetailed the data found in both the teacher surveys and interviews. While stated differently, the teachers believed that parent involvement was necessary to support student achievement and that the school must help parents to understand the need for parent involvement (at school and home) as well as the curriculum or academic goals of the grade.

The teacher monthly reflection prompts were completed by all six participants every month. The prompts asked the teachers to reflect and respond to statements or questions related to parent involvement as well as to add their own reflections on the work they were doing. An analysis of this data is discussed in the next section.

*Teacher Monthly Reflection Prompt:*

The participants in the study were asked to reflect on their involvement with the project on a monthly basis. Prompts provided by the researcher were used as a framework for these reflections. There was always an opportunity to give additional thoughts or ideas as part of the reflection exercise, though very few of the teachers chose to add supplemental information. The analysis of the monthly data is most valuable when it is reviewed by the participant. It allowed the researcher to note any patterns or changes for each individual teacher.

**Mrs. Hayes**

Mrs. Hayes noted in the first two months that her feelings about parent involvement had remained the same. She has always felt that it was important to have parents involved. She noted that parents will often communicate daily with her around issues of

scheduling. She also spoke to the fact that a number of parents offered to volunteer in her classroom and to help with specific activities. She was happy about this involvement. As the months progress, Mrs. Hayes continued to highlight the desire of many parents to volunteer. She noticed that while parents express interest in volunteering, it can be very hard with work schedules. By January she noted all of the communicating she was doing with parents, especially with one family in particular. In March, Mrs. Hayes shared her ideas for ways in which the school could enhance parent involvement. She felt that helping parents understand the curriculum could be very beneficial to the child and parents. She stated, “Some parents have indicated that they do not know the letter sounds or the current math vocabulary terms. They want to help their children, but aren’t sure how to teach them.” Her reflections served to validate her prior statements about parent involvement. She believed that volunteering in class and having parents work at home with the children are helpful parent involvement activities.

### **Mrs. Brown**

In the early months of the project, Mrs. Brown was somewhat surprised at the amount of communicating that she did with parents. In her January reflection she said, “The agenda books are so useful. I didn’t realize how much parents used them and how much I rely on them to keep things running smoothly.” She also saw a pattern emerging; it is that “parents who are involved make a big difference.” By February, Mrs. Brown reflected on the parent involvement activities in her classroom and believed that communicating was the most dominant form that was occurring and that parents appreciated this communication. She suggested that “having someone coordinate and organize the parent involvement activities would help it go smoother.” In her last monthly reflection, Mrs.

Brown stated that she believes that parents need to feel welcome in order to become involved. She felt that “some parents have a better understanding of education” and that it may be a factor in parent involvement. Her reflections continue to support her previously stated beliefs that parent involvement includes a great deal of communicating between the teacher and the parent. She suggested again that coordination at the school level would be helpful and that use of technology, including the school website and email should be considered part of a stronger, more effective parent involvement program.

**Mrs. Adams**

After the first month of the project, Mrs. Adams noted that she was unaware of how much communicating she did with parents until she started documenting it. As the project continued, Mrs. Adams reflected on her parent involvement beliefs in very much the same ways as she did previously. She noted that as she was documenting parent involvement activities, “I have found that the parents who support their child’s learning have an easier time in school. Parent involvement should be encouraged from the first day of school.” Her statements reinforced the notion that parents must be encouraged to be involved because it is vital to the success of the child.

In her February reflection, Mrs. Adams stated that communicating is the most common form of involvement in her classroom. She thinks it is the most common because parents want to be informed and that it may be the “easiest” form of involvement given people’s busy lives and work schedules. By the end of the projects, Mrs. Adams continued to be amazed by the amount of note writing and phone calling that she was doing. She also reflected on the need for parents to be shown how they may become involved in their child’s school. She stated that “training for both teachers and parents is a

good start. Something as easy as reading to your child and/or making sure the child knows that you think learning and knowledge is important.” These ideas continued to surface from Mrs. Adams, as she progressed through the study.

### **Mrs. Smith**

In the early months of the project Mrs. Smith noted that her thinking regarding parent involvement continued to remain constant and she believed that it was often the same parents who get involved. She noted how much communicating she has done and thinks the documenting helped her to know “exactly when I have contacted certain parents.” In the December reflection, Mrs. Smith noticed that “as the year progresses I find more parents are involved with their child’s academic progress.” As the project progressed Mrs. Smith continued to believe that she must communicate with parents because “when parents and teachers work together children see how important education is.” She suggested that someone to coordinate volunteer activities and the use of email would help to enhance the parent involvement program at the school.

### **Mrs. Hunter**

From the beginning of the project, Mrs. Hunter seemed already aware of the significance of parent involvement, especially communicating. In November she noted that “parent involvement is primarily communicating via the agenda. Both the teacher and parents are initiating communication and the communication purpose varies.” She also felt that her documenting of parent involvement “just confirms that parent-teacher communication is a vital component of the education process.” As the months progressed, Mrs. Hunter continued to comment on the need to communicate regularly. In her March reflection she wrote, “In general, parents who communicate more frequently

seem more engaged in their child's education. Following teacher initiated communication, parents are usually responsive and actively involved." These statements serve to reinforce the earlier finding that parents need encouragement to become involved and that once they do, there can be progress made. She also felt that as the project progressed she became more aware of the communication that was occurring. In her final reflection Mrs. Hunter stated that she believed that activities that the school can host, combining social and academic topics would help increase parent involvement. She also believed that grade level meetings for teachers and parents would help to connect more parents with the school.

### **Mrs. Early**

As all of the other participants noted, Mrs. Early felt that her practice of documenting parent involvement made her more aware of how much communicating is done with parents. She has also become more aware that there are certain parents with whom she more regularly communicates, and it is often around social emotional issues and not academic ones. In December, Mrs. Early wrote that she continued be aware of just how much communicating she does with certain parents. She could also see a connection between the parents who she sees as involved and their desire to "come through on even the little things like glue sticks, tissues, and party items." This may again support the connection between parents feeling welcome and their desire to continue to be involved with the school and classroom. In February Mrs. Early confirmed in her reflection that she needed to communicate with the parents of all children in her classroom.

"Communication with parents in the lower grades is vital in order for children to do well. It is my belief that parents need to know immediately when things are going well and

when things are not.” She stated that the parents love and appreciate the communicating that goes on from the classroom and teacher. At the end of the project Mrs. Early listed suggestions that may help to create a positive parent involvement program including, parent and child activity night; take your parent to school day, and literature and presentations on parent involvement.

The final review of the monthly reflection templates surfaced a number of the common themes found in the other data collection instruments. Communication continued to be an idea that all teachers believe must be present in an effective parent involvement program. The teachers also continue to reflect on the need for the school to reach out to parents because as they have all noted, a teacher’s time may be consumed by parents who are initiating the contact and therefore limiting the teacher’s communication with other parents. The post project interviews will serve as the final source of data to review the beliefs about necessary components of parent involvement.

*Post Project Interviews:*

At the conclusion of the project in June, 2008 the teachers were asked to participate in a final interview. This interview would seek final thoughts and ideas from the teacher participants. The questions were semi structured and created by the researcher as a way to conclude the project and to allow teachers the opportunity to speak freely about any topic related to parent involvement or their own practice.

Mrs. Hayes felt that the project made her much more aware of the communication that occurred and that it was good for her to be aware of this. She also said it made her more aware of the types of parent involvement that happened in her classroom, including volunteering. She stated that the project reinforced her understanding of the need to

encourage parents to participate in school activities. Mrs. Hayes also noted “I had more success with *book bags* this year. This is when children bring home a bag of books to read to their parent and they come back when they are done reading them.” She believed this is connected to her improved communication with parents. Mrs. Hayes also enjoyed meeting with and speaking to other teacher working on the project. She felt it was beneficial and that “it is nice to hear other points of view and perspectives and it is also great to hear from people who teach other grades.”

Mrs. Brown noted that one thing she had become more aware of was that she communicates with some of the same parents all the time. She also felt that participating in the project “made her more aware of parent involvement and that anything that makes you more aware helps; and that is good.”

Mrs. Adams noted that she enjoyed the project very much and also found speaking and working with other teachers on the project to be very interesting. Mrs. Adams did feel that the project simply reinforced what she believed about parent involvement because “I have always seen a big difference when the parents are involved.” Her final reflection was on the amount of note writing and phone calls that she makes. She said without the documentation she did not realize just how much communicating she did.

Mrs. Smith stated that her participation in the project was “enlightening”. “I noticed that I communicate with certain parents over others.” She also felt that she benefitted from working with other teachers because “many people brought up learning at home activities and I got ideas. There were different things brought up by different colleagues- and different parent perspectives, too.” Mrs. Smith believed that her participation

reinforced “the need to communicate with all parents and that we [the school staff] need to sell the school to the parents-all of them.”

Mrs. Hunter believed that her participation in the project had reinforced her belief that parent involvement is critical. She was also happy to work with other teachers. She stated, “The participation of most of the K-2 teachers provided an opportunity for us to have a shared focus that could possibly lead to a more coherent parent involvement program.”

Mrs. Early said that she enjoyed the project very much, but that she did not really speak with anyone else involved in the project outside of the meetings. She also realized that there is a great deal of communicating that she does with her parents.

The data from the post interviews overwhelming points to the fact that documenting the parent involvement activities seemed to surface for teachers not only the amount of communicating that occurs, but also patterns regarding specific parent communication. There was little evidence that they felt other forms of parent involvement occurred with the same consistency as communicating. There was some mention of the benefit of working with other teachers on parent involvement activities and that having access to different view points may not only help their professional growth but may also help to support the creation of an effective parent involvement program.

### **Data Analysis**

An analysis of the data that emerged from the various collection instruments indicated that there were a number of themes present in support of discovering the components of an effective K-2 parent involvement program. Following the analysis of data provided by surveys, pre and post interviews, classroom parent involvement logs, and monthly

reflection prompts, the researcher believed that open communication between the school and the home, the encouragement of parents to become involved by providing a positive and welcoming environment in the school, active outreach to parents by the school staff, and a recognition that parents may need support, training, or education around parent involvement and its significance are all components of an effective parent involvement program. While not always specifically stated, the participants referenced these themes in many of the instruments.

There were two other ideas that surfaced to a lesser degree, but that were mentioned by a number of participants in a few of the tools. These were the use of technology, either the website or emails, and having a coordinator of volunteers and parent involvement. There is no question that the researcher believed the participant staff at the Fletcher Elementary School had solid ideas about how they can improve or enhance their current parent involvement program.

***2. In what ways does the initiation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program affect teacher practices?***

Staff Surveys:

The data provided in the staff surveys allowed the researcher to gain a preliminary idea of how current parent involvement impacted teacher practices. As the hypothesis behind the question is that there will be some impact to teacher practices as a result of being part of the project, this data served as a starting point in the journey. All of the participant teachers felt that parent involvement was important to support both the academic and social growth of children. The teachers also indicated that activities that were home based including homework monitoring, conversations about happenings at

school, going on educational outings, and simply spending time with a child were important as was school based events such as parent teacher conferences and attending activities with a child. The teachers all felt that there was a connection between parent involvement and student achievement.

### Staff Pre-Interviews:

Similar to the survey questions, the pre interview was used as a way to establish current practice with regard to parent involvement. Given that any changes to teacher practices would be occurring as the project progressed, the interview data served as a point of comparison for the researcher. A number of themes emerged serving to illuminate how the teachers currently behave with regard to parent involvement. Given that the research question is seeking to document particular changes in teacher practices, the findings will be presented by teachers. The findings will include data collected from the various instruments and show any changes that occur over time. The researcher believes this will provide the clearest and most concise presentation of the findings.

### **Mrs. Hayes**

#### Pre Interview

In her pre interview, Mrs. Hayes spoke about the desire to have volunteers working in the school. She noted that people could get involved with the PTA or the individual classroom; “Parents are encouraged to volunteer in various activities at school.” Mrs. Hayes also referenced the importance of having parents help with homework. She believes that this helps to show the child “they [the parents] value education.” She

believed having parents show their support for education would “increase students achievement because families show they value education.”

Parent Involvement Logs

In the six month data collection period, Mrs. Hayes documented 253 instances of parent involvement. Mrs. Hayes had the highest amount of parent involvement of any teacher in the project. The first three months of data collection, presented 105 instances as compared to the last three months which had 148 parent involvement activities. It is probable that the increased communication and involvement with the data collection increased awareness of the need for parent involvement.

**Table 4- 9 Mrs. Hayes-Parent Involvement monthly totals**

Month	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
November	65	31	64	0	18	33	28	4
December	19	19	19	2	5	12	7	0
January	21	15	20	0	7	10	11	0
February	33	20	33	2	7	16	16	1
March	63	47	59	4	8	40	19	4
April	52	49	51	5	21	30	18	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>13</b>

The data from Mrs. Hayes also reflected a large number of parent involvement in the Parenting category. Mrs. Hayes stated previously that parents communicated to her around a wide array of issues facing kindergarteners and this data appears to support this finding.

Monthly Reflection Prompts

Following the first two months of the project, Mrs. Hayes noted that she often heard from the same families. She also mentioned that she had a number of parents who would like to volunteer but that can not. She reported that she would like to encourage people to become more involved. This statement reinforced her earlier statements about wanting

parents to volunteer. In January she noted that she was pleased to have a parent coming in to teach Spanish to her students. This parent came to volunteer in her classroom on a regular basis. She attributed this parent coming in to her class as a result of her participation in this project. “My students have benefited from my participation. I was able to have a parent teach Spanish and other parents participated in various ways during the school year.”

By April and May, Mrs. Hayes noticed that she has had “several parents indicate that they liked my monthly homework calendars which included suggested kindergarten activities and journal responses from parents and their children.” She stated that she implemented this activity from January to May of this year. She also saw more success with her “book bags” reading activities this year.

#### Post Interview

Mrs. Hayes continued to profess her desire for parent involvement. She saw it as critical to helping the child. She highlighted how she has become more aware of all the communicating that occurs as well as being more aware of the neediest kids and parents. “A lot of parents need TLC. I have been teaching for a long time and it makes me more aware of how to get parents to participate in school activities.” She also stated that she realized how organized she is and that she loves kindergarten.

#### **Mrs. Brown**

#### Pre Interview

During the pre interview, Mrs. Brown referenced being frustrated sometimes at what the students entering kindergarten don’t know. She also saw varying levels of parent comfort with regard to parent involvement. “Sometimes you give parents things to work

on with their kids and they have a hard time doing it because they have no foundation with it. They need to make it fun; it does not have to be a stressful and horrible thing.” Mrs. Brown also referenced volunteers in the classroom and raised some concerns about that. “I really like to choose who I have in my classroom. I have had good and bad experiences. If they don’t have a nice way with kids, they are not helpful to have in the room.” She went on to say, “I think the volunteers need to really be looked at. You need to know who is coming in and what they are doing.” It is clear to the researcher that some of the negative volunteer experiences that Mrs. Brown has had, impact her level of engagement with any potential classroom volunteer.

Mrs. Brown does believe that the school could do more to support the readiness of some children. She would like to find a way to help parents understand what they should be doing with their child to get them ready for formal schooling. “I am concerned that we have children who walk into kindergarten who have never been taught to write their name.” Mrs. Brown also believes the school should offer more training and programs for parents as a way to help them become more involved, especially as they work with their children at home. She spoke about the children she has in class and how they could all achieve more with some help at home. “If parents made a big deal about [some school] things and knew what to make a big deal about, those kids would pick it up much faster. All the kids want to do is please.”

Mrs. Brown talked about the connection she makes between the curriculum and helping at home. She cited the need to tell parents what they can do to help, especially in ways that do not cost a lot of money. “Parents can be so busy these days and they don’t know who is there to help them. They need a resource to turn to. You can have educated

business people who don't know what to do with a first grader." She talked about the school offering homework help or bringing in speakers to help with behavioral problems. "You see a lot of children come in and they have some trouble at the beginning of the year with settling."

Mrs. Brown also mentioned how she sometimes sends home information for parents so that they may help their child.

Sometimes there are kids that have had a hard time. We did sorting one time and a little guy did not understand sorting. I just kept putting my little sticky notes on saying have him sort some socks and little suggestions so you can do something nice and easy.

Prior to the children starting school, Mrs. Brown referenced the large kindergarten orientation. She discussed a number of different ways it has been presented in the past and felt that there is more that could be done to help the parents work with their children ahead of time to better prepare them for school.

#### Parent Involvement Logs

Over the course of the data collection period, Mrs. Brown noted 170 instances of parent involvement. As stated in the previous findings, the majority of these parent involvement activities were categorized as Communicating. When reviewing the monthly tallies, is difficult to note any pattern of change that emerged, except in the area of parent involvement initiation.

**Table 4- 10 Mrs. Brown-Parent Involvement Monthly Total**

Month	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
November	46	0	45	0	2	11	34	1
December	22	0	22	1	0	0	22	0
January	28	0	28	0	3	5	12	11
February	17	0	17	0	6	9	4	4
March	32	0	32	0	0	14	10	8
April	25	0	25	0	0	12	8	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>29</b>

The first three months, indicate that 68 parent involvement activities were initiated by Mrs. Brown, and only 16 were initiated by a parent. However, by the last three months, 35 were initiated by the parent while only 22 were initiated by the teacher. It is quite possible that as the year progressed, parents felt more comfortable in contacting Mrs. Brown than they had at the beginning of the year. There is also an increase in shared initiation during the last three months of data collection. This again may speak to an increased comfort by the parent to work with the classroom teacher.

#### Monthly Reflection Prompts

In November, Mrs. Brown indicated that “it is interesting to track who responds and who does not” and that “Parents who are involved make a big difference.” In both December and January, Mrs. Brown commented on how much she and the parents use the agenda as a way to communicate back and forth. When asked if she thinks documenting the communication has increased her awareness of the parent involvement she stated, “No, but it is nice to realize how great it is to easily transmit information back and forth.” She did say that she was noticing “what types of students/parents you hear from and don’t hear from.” By the mid point in the project Mrs. Brown continued to notice a pattern related to who she wrote (in student agenda books) to more often. She also said she believed documenting the parent involvement activities in her class had

helped her to improve her communication. She wrote, “I decided to make sure everyone gets a “great day” in their agenda book.” Mrs. Brown believed that “by letting parents know areas that children need to practice, the students improve.” In her final reflection, Mrs. Brown stated that while she “has not had much parent involvement in the classroom” she has had involvement as far as notes and staying on top of what is happening.”

### Post Interview

In her post project interview, Mrs. Brown stated that she felt her time spent documenting the parent involvement activities made her more aware of how much communicating she does. “I think anything that makes you more aware helps”. She did not feel as if the work with other teachers impacted her, as she states that she really didn’t speak with other teachers about it. She did say that the project reinforced her thinking about parent involvement. And while she may feel that she did not change her behavior as a result of the project, she did note, “I had one parent that was not an agenda book checker so I sent stuff with her sister.”

### **Mrs. Adams**

#### Pre Interview

Mrs. Adams expressed a genuine interest in educating parents about parental involvement and in having parents volunteer in her classroom. She also spoke about how she believes a parent helping a child at home is important. When asked about homework she stated, “I don’t know if parents believe that helping with homework is helpful parent involvement. If you talk to some of the parents here that do help their kids, they do believe it because it shows. Other people are less involved.” She is not completely sure

why that it, but she theorizes that parents either don't know how to help or may be too busy.

With regard to parent volunteers, Mrs. Adams said she was happy to have them in her class. Her only concern was usually "confidentiality" although some other teachers warned she should be aware of parents "with agendas." She stated that "if parents were more active in the school maybe, they would be more active with their child." She believes that parents need to be a part of their child's education and that the school must communicate with parents. "If you don't talk to them and let them know what is going on, then how are you going to make it better for the child? It is about making it better for the child. The kids that don't learn will lose interest fast."

#### Parent Involvement Logs

Over the course of the project, Mrs. Adams documented 87 instances of parent involvement. By far, the largest classification of activity was Communicating which represented 86% of all her parent involvement activity. As compared to the other teacher participants, Mrs. Adams had the largest percent of activities in the Volunteering category, which may serve to validate her many statements endorsing having parents volunteer in the classroom. Volunteering represented 12% of her parent involvement activity.

**Table 4-11 Mrs. Adams-Parent Involvement Monthly Total**

Month	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
November	16	2	15	1	2	5	8	3
December	18	1	13	4	5	11	6	1
January	12	0	11	1	2	4	6	2
February	15	1	13	2	2	4	6	5
March	12	0	12	0	0	2	10	0
April	14	0	11	2	2	4	9	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>12</b>

Mrs. Adams data also indicated that as the year progressed there were more teacher initiated contacts than parent initiated ones. The data does not highlight any significant patterns, but again it does serve to reinforce much of what Mrs. Adams stated in her interview and survey regarding people coming in to her classroom.

### Monthly Reflection Prompts

In November, Mrs. Adams indicated that she “has noticed that the children who are better students have parents who are thoroughly involved in their lives.” She also stated that as a result of her documenting parent involvement, she is more aware of the amount of notes she writes. By February Mrs. Adams had grown more aware of “just how much I communicate with parents. As a parent/teacher I always like to keep the parents informed. An informed parent is a happy parent.” She noted that communicating is the most common form of parent involvement in her classroom. She believes “it is a way for parents to be involved but doesn’t require any commitment.” Mrs. Adams also felt that in kindergarten the parent’s responses to communication or school outreach are positive. She believed, “this would be the best time to capture the parents and set up the communication format.”

Mrs. Adams also reflected on increased student performance as a result of her increased communication with parents. “When I talk to the parents or write that their child needs help with something in my class the child always does better.” In March, Mrs. Adams discussed how she believes training for parents and teachers about parent involvement would be helpful. “Something as easy as reading to your child and/or making sure the child knows you think learning and knowledge is important.” She also expressed the belief that teachers can specifically benefit from professional development

for parent involvement. “There are many ways parents can become involved in their child’s learning that the staff may not be aware of.” In her final reflection, Mrs. Adams noted that parents become involved for many reasons and that parents must feel welcome. She believed a parent coordinator and using technology (email) to communicate with parents would help enhance a parent involvement program. She also indicated that “I think that I should write more positive notes.”

### Post Interview

In her post interview, Mrs. Adams noted that she enjoyed being part of the project and that she also enjoyed speaking with other teachers about the project and how it was going. Mrs. Adams indicated that her participation has reinforced her belief that it makes a big difference when parents are involved. She also notes that documenting what is going on in the classroom makes you more aware of the type and how much you communicate with parents.

### **Mrs. Smith**

#### Pre Interview

During the pre interview, Mrs. Smith noted that the amount of parent involvement in her classroom varies from year to year, based on the children. She stated that this year she did not see a lot of involvement compared to some other years. She also spoke about homework as a way to connect the classroom activities to the parent. She described how different families may view homework differently, with some of them “having a plan” and others not having one.

Mrs. Smith additionally talked about the need to reach out and invite parents and community members into the school. “We all get locked into our little cubicle.” She

believes if parents can become involved at the school, it lets a child know “their parent is part of something.”

Parent Involvement Logs

Throughout the data collection period, Mrs. Smith documented 206 instances of parent involvement. 187 or 91% of the involvement was in the area of Communicating.

**Table 4-12 Mrs. Smith-Parent Involvement Monthly Totals**

Month	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
November	14	0	8	3	6	3	9	2
December	15	0	13	2	3	9	5	1
January	46	1	42	2	4	18	28	0
February	43	0	41	1	3	25	17	0
March	56	1	53	3	16	31	25	0
April	32	0	30	6	14	22	10	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>3</b>

Mrs. Smith also had 46 or 22% of the activity in Learning at Home. The Learning at Home category for the last three months of the project had 33 instances which showed a big increase when compared to the first three months of the project, which only had 13 instances. This change in practice may have been a product of the teacher discussions throughout the project. Mrs. Smith believed that she expanded her learning at home activities as a result of hearing from other teachers and “getting ideas.” There was also a large increase in total communications from the first 3 to the last three months of documenting. November, December, and January had a combined total of 75 parent involvement activities while February, March, and April had a combined total of 131. The exact reason for the increase is unclear; however, Mrs. Smith has noted that as a result of documenting she became aware of the need to communicate with all parents and not just certain ones.

### Monthly Reflection Prompts

In the November reflection prompt, Mrs. Smith reiterated her belief that “every year it seems that a group of parents want to be involved in their child’s education and others choose to remain silent.” In December, Mrs. Smith spoke about the parents becoming more comfortable with her and becoming more involved. She also noted that as she documents things, she noticed a pattern of parents who are involved. By February Mrs. Smith was aware that the parents who seem to be most involved are the parents of either “advanced students or at risk students.” She also saw that the majority of her parent involvement is in the area of communicating.

Further, Mrs. Smith started to reflect on the learning at home category, which was new thinking for her. She attributed this change in practice to being part of the group project meetings and collegial conversations. “I think about learning at home because I am always trying to keep parents aware of what is happening with their child in the classroom.” Mrs. Smith also noted that the parents have seemed positive and receptive to her communications.

In March, Mrs. Smith continued to note the amount of communicating that she did, especially with the “parents of her advanced level students” and that these students “have soared.” She shared a similar feeling about her “below level” students and the parents that have asked her how they can help. She saw great academic growth in these children as well. Additionally, Mrs. Smith indicated that “my students have benefited from my being in the project because I have become more actively involved with their parents. Students do realize when the lines of communication are open. I am also reminded to

communicate with all parents.” Her final reflection serves to reinforce all of her previously stated beliefs.

#### Post Interview

The final interview served as an opportunity for Mrs. Smith to reinforce much of what she had already discovered. She noted that she has become aware of the need to communicate with all parents and that open communication can be very positive for the child.

#### **Mrs. Hunter**

#### Pre Interview

During her pre interview, Mrs. Hunter discussed how she might tell a new teacher that there are a limited number of parents that are involved, at least as far as those coming into school and volunteering in classrooms. She did note, however, that she felt that she had a good understanding of “her own” parents. She spoke about how she believes there is a strong connection between parent involvement and achievement. She pointed out that even as far as homework goes, her own experience indicated that some parents see it as an important connection to school and some do not. “Not all parents think it’s a part of their involvement, and I differentiate between those that will and those that won’t, before I send home homework. Some parents will want to be a part of it and some parents don’t have the time or interest and there are those who don’t think they should be a part of it.”

Mrs. Hunter continued to validate her earlier statements about valuing parent involvement and seeing it as an important ingredient in student success. “The more the parents are involved with the students, the more stable and organized and focused the

students are.” Mrs. Hunter believes that there is much more that could be done to get more parents involved.

Parent Involvement Logs

During the six months of data collection, Mrs. Hunter logged 243 instances of parent involvement in her classroom. 100% of these were in the Communicating category and 17% were the Learning at Home category.

**Table 4- 13 Mrs. Hunter-Parent Involvement Monthly Totals**

Month	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
November	15	1	15	0	2	8	7	0
December	23	0	23	0	3	9	14	0
January	58	0	58	0	6	33	25	0
February	45	0	45	0	10	22	20	3
March	55	0	55	0	10	12	43	0
April	47	0	47	0	9	19	28	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>0</b>

As has been the pattern for other teachers, there was a substantial increase in parent involvement instances during the second half of the project. The first three months there were 96 documented parent involvement activities and in the last three months, there were 147 instances. Again, this may point to the increased awareness of the need for parent involvement as the project progressed. Mrs. Hunter did note that she became more aware of the need to communicate with all parents throughout the duration of the project.

Monthly Reflection Prompts

In Mrs. Hunter’s November reflection, she spoke about how the documenting of activity has confirmed her belief that parent involvement is a “vital component to the education process.” She also stated that documenting all the involvement,

Has reminded me that I used to send home a monthly newsletter; a project that got lost in the onslaught of so many other classroom requirements. Somehow I would

like to find the time to resume the newsletter. It has also reminded me that I need to contact parents regarding volunteering. In the past several years, parents have approached me and have provided valuable volunteer time. So far this year no parent has expressed interest. Therefore, I will soon send home a request and will hopefully be able to engage some parents in classroom volunteer service.

In December and January Mrs. Hunter continued to reflect on ways in which she can encourage more parent involvement.

In March, Mrs. Hunter noted in her reflection that “following teacher initiated communication, parents are usually responsive and actively involved.” She also stated that she would like time to contact professionals in other school systems to learn what is implemented and to what extent parent involvement programs are successful.” Mrs. Hunter also suggested a “meeting of the minds” initiative that would “bring parents and teachers together at each grade level for an open forum discussion.”

Mrs. Hunter spent a good deal of time elaborating on her participation in the project and how it has changed her practice. “Participation has prompted thinking about ways to increase parental involvement- direct involvement in the learning process. I have increased positive feedback to parents regarding behavior and academics.” She went on to describe a program that she has developed in her classroom. “Students take turns carrying special animal backpacks home overnight. Backpacks contain positive reports. Parents have shown their appreciation for this communication.”

In her final reflection Mrs. Hunter reaffirmed that she believes parent involvement has a direct effect on student achievement. She also suggested how to be more effective with parent involvement. For Mrs. Hunter, “Participation in the project has raised the question:

How can parents become more informed and understanding in terms of the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade curriculum?” She suggested the “creation of a booklet of math strategies for parents. The purpose is to give parents a list of strategies taught in school which they can reinforce at home with their child.”

#### Post Interview

In the post interview, Mrs. Hunter commented that she had enjoyed meeting with colleagues. “It was interesting to hear comments and ideas when we met as a group. She commented that Epstein’s six types of parent involvement chart was informative and she will use it as a reference in the future.

#### **Mrs. Early**

#### Pre Interview

In her pre interview, Mrs. Early took the opportunity to speak about the importance of parent involvement and especially communication. She referenced how she will often check in with parents following a meeting. She wanted to be sure that they had a full understanding of what was discussed. She also discussed how difficult portions of the curriculum can be. She notes, “I [want to say] the spelling is hard and the reading is hard. You need to read with them. If we are talking about ants this week, then go get a book about ants and talk about ants at home. That is what I would do. That is what I am doing.” Mrs. Early also spoke about the newsletter that she sends home. She stated that she has received some comments on things in the newsletter so she thinks they are being read.

### Parent Involvement Logs

During the six months of the project Mrs. Early documented 85 instances of parent involvement. All but one was classified as the communicating form of involvement. A review of the data seems to indicate that there was a good deal of consistency with regard to the involvement each month.

**Table 4-14 Mrs. Early-Parent Involvement Monthly Totals**

Month	Instances	Parenting	Communicating	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Parent Initiated	Teacher Initiated	Both
November	16	1	15	0	0	5	9	0
December	11	0	11	0	0	1	10	0
January	14	0	14	0	0	2	12	0
February	13	0	13	0	0	4	9	0
March	19	0	19	0	0	8	10	1
April	12	0	12	0	0	7	5	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>1</b>

When the initiation origin is reviewed, it is clear that as compared to all of the other participant teachers, Mrs. Early has the greatest percent of parent involvement being initiated solely by the teacher. They account for 67% of all activities. This is 11% higher than the next closest teacher. It is unclear whether Mrs. Early initiated more parent involvement than the parents themselves, or whether her interpretation of the initiation was different from the other teachers. Given that Mrs. Early had the least amount of overall parent involvement, it may be concluded that her documentation practices may have altered the actual data that was collected. A simple review of the data indicated that Mrs. Early did initiate most of the parent involvement that occurred in her classroom.

### Monthly Reflection Prompts

At the start of the project Mrs. Early noted that she communicated a great deal and that she seems to communicate more “with the parents whose children have social emotional issues.” While noticing this she stated, “I would like to make a New Years

Resolution to write a positive comment weekly in each child's agenda; communicate with all instead of the same 4 or 5." She wrote that she continued to "want to write more positive notes to the parents of the children who do a great job!"

In her March reflection, Mrs. Early suggested that professional development may help teachers. She included ideas such as how to get parents involved and how to educate parents. She also believes that more outreach to parents and information about the importance of parent involvement would help. She stated by this point in the year "my students know that I am closely involved with their parents and in turn are more inclined to do what is asked." In her final reflection she stated that she believes "it takes a village to raise a child."

#### Post Interview

In her post project interview, Mrs. Early noted that being in the project reinforced her thinking about parent involvement. She believes it is important. She also stated, "I realized from a parent perspective how much little things mean-like shows and newsletters. If you don't look at it freshly, you don't realize how much they enjoy it."

#### **Data Analysis**

An analysis of the data indicated that there were a number of changes in teacher practices as a result of being involved in the initiation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program. The researcher concluded that, based on the teacher statements found in many of the data collection instruments, there was an increase in awareness and activity in regard to communicating with parents. The surveys and interviews served to establish some preliminary parent involvement practices used by the teachers.

The parent involvement logs and monthly reflection prompts provided clear data that there was change occurring. Not only were parent involvement activities increasing, but teachers were becoming very aware of their need to do better outreach to all parents. There was a consensus that they all needed to consciously work to engage all parents and not just the ones who were problematic or engaged them. Further, there was an increased awareness of the types of parent involvement that occurred or that needed to occur. The teachers noticed a need for increased opportunity to train and educate parents about the benefits of parent involvement.

The participants also saw academic improvements in a number of students whose parents had become involved with the child's work. What can not be established is how the impact of teacher interest or investment influenced any outcome. Was it truly the parent involvement such as additional work at home or inquiries from parents about how they could help that influenced this improvement or did the teacher now see a student whose parents were interested in helping and that is what made the difference?

Finally, a number of the teachers reflected on their work with colleagues. Some of them referenced how much they enjoyed speaking and working as a team around the subject of parent involvement. On the other hand, there were a few of the teachers that stated they did not communicate much with any of their colleagues at all. The data does clearly show, however, that there was in fact some impact on every teacher's practice as a result of being part of the initiation and implementation of a parent involvement program.

### ***#3 How has participation in the project impacted teacher beliefs about parental involvement?***

Themes and patterns related to teacher beliefs emerged following the analysis of the data presented from all of the tools. While it may be difficult to conclude at what point teacher beliefs changed, it is clear that throughout the course of the project a number of teacher beliefs regarding parent involvement did undergo some changes. The majority of the data, however, seemed to indicate that participation in the project reinforced the beliefs that teachers had regarding parent involvement.

Given that the project participants have all been teaching for a number of years, in various school systems, the researcher believed that each teacher would bring to the project certain beliefs related to parental involvement. Each of the data collection tools was analyzed and the researcher looked for evidence of any changes throughout the course of the project. As the research question looks at general teacher beliefs about parental involvement, the data will be displayed by each of the instruments used. The researcher believes this will be the clearest way to present and discuss the findings.

#### **Staff Surveys:**

The staff surveys provided a solid foundation for establishing teacher beliefs around parent involvement. All of the teachers were able to describe the numerous parent involvement experiences that they had. The teachers listed volunteers in the classroom, writing notes and placing phone calls, having meetings and conferences, and having parents attend school social functions as some of the parent involvement with which they were involved. A review of the data generated from their responses indicated that they

believe that parent involvement can mean many things. Some of these would be school based such as meetings and volunteering and some of these would be home based such as parents and children talking about school and working on homework together. All six of the teachers believed that there is a connection between parent involvement and student achievement.

The teachers also indicated that while there were a number of parent involvement occurrences at the school, there could be far more done in the way of encouraging parents. Mrs. Hayes felt that “providing more child care options or after school programs such as music and art programs could encourage parental involvement.” Mrs. Brown felt that the use of the school website would help to encourage needed involvement and Mrs. Early believed the school needs to “continue to be a positive, helpful, and friendly environment.”

The teacher beliefs that emanated from the survey data reinforced the previous findings; primarily as they related to teacher beliefs that parent involvement is important, it helps to increase student achievement, and is something that needs to be encouraged by the school and school staff. It was also apparent from the data that the teachers prioritized differently the types of parent involvement needed.

#### Staff Pre-Interviews:

An analysis of the pre interview data highlighted a number of themes including that teachers have a strong belief about what effective parent involvement is as well as what might be done to increase parent involvement. There was also data to support that teachers have certain beliefs about parents and why they may not seem to be as involved

with their child's education. This is an important finding, because it will serve as a reference point to show change in some of the teacher's beliefs.

In the pre interview Mrs. Hayes talked about how "parents are encouraged to volunteer for classroom activities, field trips, and community reading day activities." She also believed that "parents need to monitor their child's homework and show that they value education." With regard to parent involvement and curriculum, as a kindergarten teacher she believed parent involvement would be enhanced if parent had information about grade level expectations and curriculum information.

Mrs. Brown has some strong beliefs about parent involvement. She felt that having parents help in the classroom can be a very positive thing, but that it is not appropriate for everyone. Mrs. Brown also believed that while parents may want to be involved, many of them do not know how to become involved or what they can do to help their child be more successful. She stated that "very young parents are still a little intimidated, so an opportunity to let the parent know what is out there [would help them to know that] they can ask for help." She also felt that "parents think parent involvement means that parents come in to the classroom helping. I think they need to realize how much more they can do at home." She stated that she makes suggestions, but that she believes that some parents do not fully understand how important parent involvement is.

Mrs. Brown went on to suggest that while parents may think volunteering is the only way to be involved, that "parents need to also understand how to support the school at home." In a very interesting exchange, Mrs. Brown talked about "getting to kids earlier" so that they may have experiences that would help them prepare for school. "I would love to think that some of the parents understood the experiences their children should be

having, and what they could do for them. I don't meet with one parent who doesn't seem to want the best for their kids. I just don't know that they understand the importance."

Mrs. Adams also has some beliefs about parent involvement that she referenced in her pre interview. She stated that she enjoyed having volunteers in her classroom very much. She made the connection between working on homework and parent involvement. Mrs. Adams believed, "A parent that shows interest in a child's homework, shows that it is important to the parents and that makes it seem to the child that it is important." Mrs. Adams also spoke about her beliefs around parent involvement based on her own experience as a parent. She talked about how she knows how important parent involvement is, such as showing interest in your child's work and setting up the right kind of study habits. Mrs. Adams said she knows the connection between home and school helps achievement because "she sees it all the time when kids don't get the help at home. They bring things home to work on and practice and they don't seem to get better at it."

Mrs. Adams also believed that it was important to get the parents involved as early as possible, especially in the younger grades. She believed that school work can just get more difficult the older the child gets, so that earlier involvement may help to lay a foundation for later involvement.

The pre interview data emerging from the interview with Mrs. Smith indicated that she had strong beliefs regarding parent involvement. As all of the previous teachers have mentioned, Mrs. Smith also believed there was a connection between parent involvement and achievement and that the earlier the parents can become involved, the better for the child. She noted that she enjoys having parents volunteer for activities or special projects

in her class. Mrs. Smith believed that some parents see helping their children as an “extra burden.” “When a child says they have homework, some parents look at it like it is one more chore, while parents on the other side already have a [homework] game plan. It depends on the family and the parent’s agenda.” Mrs. Smith also believed that “parents need to know what they can be involved in. She said she sees a difference with the child when the parents are involved.

Mrs. Hunter reflected on her many years of teaching and how that has framed her beliefs about parent involvement. She said she had parents who came into her classroom as often as they could, but that many of them are busy working. Just as the other teachers have stated, she believed that when a parent is involved helping at home, with things like homework, a child will do better in school. She noted that not all parents see a connection between homework, parent involvement and student success in school. She does believe, “if I have had contact with them, some parents will automatically want to be a part of it and [then there are] those parents who don’t have the time or interest and those who don’t think they should be a part of it.”

Mrs. Hunter continued to reflect on her experience as she articulated her beliefs about parent involvement. She stated,

From a personal experience as a classroom teacher, the more the parents are involved with the students, the more stable and organized and focused the students are. They don’t have to be the strongest students; they are more organized with the material and homework. Again, it is just parents sitting down and helping with homework. It doesn’t matter if it is a strong student or a weaker students, or a student in between. You definitely notice the difference. Especially this year, there have been a lot of

intact families devoted to their children.

It was clear than Mrs. Hunter believed there was a very strong need for parents to be involved with their children's education. She also believed that it would have a positive effect on any child, regardless of the level of in school support they may need.

The sixth participant, Mrs. Early had similar beliefs to some of the other teachers with regard to parent involvement. She felt that parent involvement was important to help all children experience achievement in school. "Homework is important in reading and math and it is important in making successful children. The children who are not being helped are the children who are not being successful." She also believed that as the classroom teacher it is her responsibility to reach out positively to the parent. She believed that being open with parents will help to create a good relationship between herself, the parent, and student.

While the six teachers stated their beliefs in different ways, it was clear that the data showed some patterns. All of the teachers believed that parent involvement is necessary, should be encouraged, and will have a positive effect on student achievement. While some of the participants clearly stated that they felt it was their responsibility to engage the parents, others did not. There was also a theme that blossomed out of the interviews that related to a belief that some parents don't know that they need to be involved and that some can't find a way to become involved. There was also a belief that some parents simply are too busy or chose not to become involved.

#### Parent Involvement Logs:

The Parent Involvement Logs provided interesting information pertaining to teacher beliefs about parent involvement. From a very general perspective, over the course of the

project, the six teachers were able to identify 1044 instances of parent involvement. The researcher concluded that the teachers believed that parent involvement was important to the daily workings of the classroom. When looking at the individual instances, it was apparent that Communicating was believed to be the most dominant form of parental involvement. This finding is supported by earlier findings related to the types of parent involvement that occur over time.

A review of the data also indicated that there were differing beliefs around the types of parent involvement that occur. All of the project participants were given the same definitions and descriptions of the four types of parent involvement that they should be documenting. The researcher met with all participants together so that there was an opportunity for everyone to clarify any questions they had. It was important for data collection purposes that everyone worked from the same definitions and descriptions of the activity. While Communicating was the primary form of involvement documented, there was a significant range of instances between all six teachers. Table 4-15 displays the data related to Communicating that was collected from each of the classrooms.

**Table 4-15 Communicating Parent Involvement Totals**

Participant	Communicating Parent Involvement
Mrs. Hayes	246
Mrs. Brown	169
Mrs. Adams	75
Mrs. Smith	187
Mrs. Hunter	243
Mrs. Early	84

While the variance in instances may not be conclusively connected to teacher beliefs the researcher was able to conclude that the data indicated some teachers believe that they communicate with parents on a very regular basis.

In the category of Parenting, there was also an interesting finding that emerged. One of the teachers, Mrs. Hayes, documented 181 instances, while the next closest number of instances was from Mrs. Adams, who only had four occurrences. The researcher concluded that Mrs. Hayes had a belief that much of the parent involvement that occurred in her class, whether it was Communicating, Volunteering, or Learning at Home, served as a type of Parenting involvement.

Learning at Home data indicated that the teachers were able to connect many of their communicating activities with learning at home. While the logs showed communicating over student schedules, daily classroom activities, and behavior, the participants believed that a good number of these also related to Learning at Home. Many of the activities took the form of responding to parent requests for additional work or ways to help their child, while some of them generated from the teacher suggesting to the parent that there were ways to work at home with their child.

Steeped in these types of communications were beliefs that the teachers had related to parent involvement. If they did not believe that bridging school work to the home was important, there would not be the number of occurrences that were documented. Four of the teachers, Mrs. Hayes, Mrs. Adams, Mrs. Smith, and Mrs. Hunter, initiated a greater number of Learning at Home activities for the second half of the project. This data may

support a change in teacher beliefs with regard to the necessity of enhancing this form of parent involvement, especially as the year progressed.

An additional finding emerged related to the teacher beliefs about volunteering and how this belief seemed to be challenged by the parent involvement classroom log data. All of the teachers, in either the survey or pre interview data, referenced how they enjoyed having volunteers in their classroom. A number of them discussed the positive experiences they have had with parent volunteers working in their classroom. However, a review of the parent involvement log data indicated that Volunteering activities occurred only at a very minimal rate. The range of instances went from none, which two of the teachers noted, to seventeen. Also, every instance of Volunteering, no matter which teacher reported it, was initiated by the parent and not the teacher. Given this small representation, the researcher concluded that while the teachers believed they valued this type of activity, there was not much data to support that they worked to encourage volunteering as a form of parent involvement; at least as it was represented on their logs.

As has been discussed, the analysis of the parent involvement log data seems to indicate that there were changes in some beliefs of the teachers in the project. While the changes were small, they do seem to reinforce the importance of teacher awareness of the necessity of parent involvement.

#### Monthly Reflection Prompts:

##### **Mrs. Hayes**

In the early months of the project Mrs. Hayes noted that her beliefs about parent involvement had not changed and that they were similar to her original beliefs. She commented that she has had a couple of volunteers during the fall months for different

projects. This served to validate not only her previously discussed data, but the number of statements that she made regarding her desire to have volunteers in the classroom.

In her January reflection, Mrs. Hayes stated that “many parents would like to volunteer in the classroom if they can have enough time to rearrange work schedules.” In February Mrs. Hayes continued to speak about her beliefs that parents want to be involved. She said that “parents are generally very supportive and love to help in any way possible and those parents are very willing to help their child learn in Kindergarten.” By the spring, Mrs. Hayes indicated that she felt her parents want to be involved with their child’s education. She offered suggestions for ways the school could include more parents. The researcher concluded that her beliefs were reinforced by her participation in the project.

### **Mrs. Brown**

In November, Mrs. Brown stated that she believed “parents who are involved make a big difference.” In December, she felt that her beliefs about parent involvement had not changed. In February, Mrs. Brown started to comment on the number of people she communicated with, and how it is often the same people. She stated that she believed “most parents appreciate the communication I do, and that she had “decided to make sure everyone gets a “great day” in their agenda book. Mrs. Brown also believed that “by letting parents know areas that children need to practice, the students improve.” In March, Mrs. Brown stated that while “This year I have not had many parents involved, my class has overall done very well.” In her final reflection Mrs. Brown stated, “I have not had much parent involvement this year in the classroom but I have had a lot of involvement as far as notes and staying on top of what is happening.” The researcher noted a change in Mrs. Brown’s belief about exactly what parent involvement means. At

the beginning of the project Mrs. Brown felt that she did not have many parents involved but by the end of the project she was able to differentiate between in class involvement and involvement at home, both of which she concluded helps the child.

### **Mrs. Adams**

At the start of the project, Mrs. Adams noted that she believed “children who are better students have parents who are thoroughly involved in their lives.” She believed that “the parents who are involved in their children’s academic performance always achieve higher grades.” In December, Mrs. Adams continued to show that she had the same beliefs regarding parent involvement. “The more a parent is involved in the child’s learning the better the student’s success. A child learns from the parent as a model, that school is an essential part of their lives.” In January, Mrs. Adams made a specific claim that showed the researcher a deeper belief than had been previously discussed. She wrote, “No matter what the parent’s education level or income, if the parent is involved, the student reaches a higher level of achievement.” By February, Mrs. Adams was aware of how her outreach had impacted parent involvement, and in her mind, student achievement. She stated, “When I talk to the parents or write that their child needs help with something in my class the child always does better.” In March Mrs. Adams reflected on possible training for both teachers and parents as a way to inform them about the importance of parent involvement. In her final reflection, Mrs. Adams wrote about a few beliefs that she had regarding parent involvement. She believed that “parents become involved for many reasons and that parents need to feel welcome into the school or their child’s classroom.” Throughout the course of the project Mrs. Adams did not waiver from her initial belief that parent involvement is critical to the success of a child. What

the researcher noticed, however, was that Mrs. Adams seemed to become more inclusive in her beliefs and that she felt most parents wanted to become involved but that they need to feel welcome and possibly need better training and outreach.

### **Mrs. Smith**

Mrs. Smith's November reflection indicates that she has not changed her beliefs about parent involvement since the pre interview or survey was given. She continued to believe that it is very important. Mrs. Smith also stated, "Every year it seems that a group of parents want to be involved in their child's education and others choose to remain silent. And it is always a mix of high, middle, and at risk students." She continued to articulate these beliefs in her December reflection. She wrote, "Each year I find I have a group of parents that are interested in their child's academic and social progress. Other parents just don't seem to be interested in being involved." The researcher noted that in both the November and December reflections, Mrs. Smith seemed to believe that there are parents who are not interested in their child's progress. In January, Mrs. Smith continued to express her belief about parents and their involvement. She did note for the first time, however, that some parents "just don't seem to have the time to be involved." The researcher noted that this was the first response from Mrs. Smith that indicated she may now believe that a parent wants to be involved, but that there may be an obstacle to enacting that involvement. In her March reflection, Mrs. Smith described her ideas on how to make a parent involvement program more effective. She noted that the school outreach needs to start with kindergarten parents. "Parents today are very busy, but they need to realize that their involvement is important to their child's academic growth." She believes parents need to understand that their commitment does not require a huge

amount of time. She also noted that “parents need to know they are welcome in the classroom.” In her final reflection Mrs. Smith reiterated that she believes “some parents understand the importance of a partnership between home and school for their child to have a successful academic career. These are the parents that choose to get involved.” In another statement Mrs. Smith noted that “parents must get the feeling that they are welcome in the class and in the school and that they are a vital partner in their child’s education.” The researcher noted that these two beliefs may be interpreted as being contradictory. While one belief assumes certain parents want to get involved the other competing belief notes that parents must be encouraged and feel welcome in order to be involved.

### **Mrs. Hunter**

In the early months of the project Mrs. Hunter continued to articulate her previously shared beliefs regarding parent involvement. Primarily that parent involvement is vital to a child’s success. She stated in January that she continues to think about ways to involve parents. The researcher noted that Mrs. Hunter believes that engaging parents in the school process is partially her responsibility. In March Mrs. Hunter wrote, “Following teacher initiated communication, parents are usually responsive and actively involved.” That same month she also wrote, “I am prompted to think about ways to increase parental involvement in the learning process.” The final reflection indicated that while Mrs. Hunter had noted a number of times that she was looking for ways to involve parents, she still believes, “parents involve themselves in their child’s education because they care and are willing to spend time to demonstrate their interest in their child’s social, emotional, and academic wellbeing.” While Mrs. Hunter’s beliefs seem to have evolved

throughout the course of the study, she still feels that certain parents involve themselves because they care about their child.

### **Mrs. Early**

In November Mrs. Early writes that she believes “those parents that are involved in their child’s lives are successful.” In February she started to indicate that there needs to be outreach to parents in order for them to become involved. She writes, “communication to all parents is the key to whether they are involved or not.” In her March reflection, Mrs. Early reiterated her belief about the connection between parent involvement and achievement. “Those parents that are involved with their children tend to do better in school. The parents value education and want the child to do well.” In her final reflection Mrs. Early proposes suggestions on how to get parents to become more involved, including offering activities and literature on parent involvement. The researcher noted that Mrs. Early’s beliefs about parent involvement did not seem to change as a result of her participation in the project.

### Post Interviews:

The post interviews provided an additional opportunity for teachers to articulate their beliefs about parent involvement. These post interviews also allowed the researcher an opportunity to note any changes in beliefs that had occurred over the duration of the project. All of the teachers indicated that they enjoyed being a part of the project, and a number of them stated that it had shown them just how much communicating they did.

Again, all six of the participants seemed to feel that their work in the project validated their previous beliefs about the importance of parent involvement. There were also responses from some of the teachers that they noticed how they spent more time engaged

in parent involvement activities related to a “certain parent or group of parents” than they did to all of the parents. Their belief that they were equally communicating with all parents was challenged by their own data and noted by all of the teachers. They all professed that this was not what they wanted.

### **Data Analysis**

The findings generated from all of these data instruments point to one major conclusion; that the involvement in the project served primarily as a way to reinforce teacher beliefs about the importance of parent involvement. A secondary conclusion emerged as some of the teachers indicated that the involvement in the project did change a few parent involvement beliefs, especially as they related to better classroom outreach. The teachers noted the disproportionate communication that was done with a number of parents, specifically those who had engaged the teacher more or those who were, as Mrs. Smith noted, “more astute to parent school relationships.” All of the teachers concluded that it was their job to do better outreach and to continue to “draw in” as many parents as possible. Additionally, a number of the teachers believed that when they engaged parents the parents became more involved and the student did better with their school work.

Another important finding indicated that as a result of the project, a couple of teachers concluded that their outreach to parents could help to engage these parents in positive ways. This challenged their earlier beliefs that some parents either don’t care or are too busy to support their child’s education at home.

#### ***#4 What were the challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program?***

An analysis of the data indicated that there were a number of challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program. These challenges emanated from teacher

practices and beliefs, as well as from some institutional practices that occurred. A final challenge to the creation may be connected to the parent's lack of information regarding the practice of both formal and informal parent involvement.

As the previous findings outlines, all six teachers in the project believed that parent involvement is important to a child's success in school. Words such as "critical", "vital", and "necessary" were used to describe the need for parent involvement. The teachers were very focused on parent involvement in their individual classrooms. In fact, a number of the teachers referenced being "involved with their own students and families" or not knowing what happens in other classrooms because they just focus on what is happening with their own students.

The data analysis allowed the researcher to summarize and categorize the primary challenges to the creation of a parent involvement program. All of the challenges that emerged from the analysis of the data were able to be categorized in one of three ways; teacher or classroom related challenges, parent related challenges, or school and systemic challenges. Many of the challenges overlapped into more than one category.

#### Staff Surveys:

The staff surveys provided a great deal of information related to challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program. As has been previously discussed, the teacher participants were all able to identify positive parent involvement activities that they had experienced over many years. There was mention of classroom volunteers, parent teacher meetings, and clear communication between the parents and the teacher. There were also a number of easily identified negative experiences, many of which are related to potential challenges facing parent involvement.

Four of the teachers, Mrs. Adams, Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Smith, and Mrs. Hunter noted issues related to confidentiality or parent personal agendas as a challenge facing the encouragement of parent classroom volunteers. Mrs. Adams stated, “You need to know your parents. Some parents have hidden agendas about getting in the classroom. This can turn bad for the teacher involved and the students.” She also stated, “Confidentiality is sometimes a problem when parents are involved with other parent’s children. You would have to talk to every parent about confidentiality with students.” Mrs. Smith identified a potential issue as “when a parent has a personal agenda that may not involve their child’s academic growth.”

There was also a belief by some of the teachers that parent’s may not know what they either can be or should be doing to support their child’s success in school. Mrs. Early stated, “Some parents lack an understanding about the importance of being involved with their child-they don’t feel they have the time to give.” Mrs. Brown stated, “Parents are unsure what they should be working on.”

An additional challenge mentioned by all six of the teachers involved time availability and work schedules of parents. There was a clear understanding, on behalf of all the teachers, that there could be external reasons that parents may appear to not be involved. This was the only factor identified by all of the participants, which lead the researcher to conclude that this was a very real challenge to program creation; at least as the teachers currently understood what parent involvement meant. Mrs. Hayes referenced “work schedules and child care responsibilities,” Mrs. Hunter wrote “many parents work long hours, there is a time and energy factor,” and Mrs. Adams noted the “financial needs of life today” as potential challenges to increased parent involvement.

A final challenge that emerged from the survey data related to the school's lack of maximally engaging parents. A number of the teachers referenced the use of the website or email as a way to reach more parents. While they all acknowledged newsletters and other paper communication, they felt that a more diverse way of providing information to parents would help to reach a larger audience. Mrs. Hayes and Mrs. Adams suggested the use of parent email addresses and Mrs. Brown noted establishing classroom web pages. Mrs. Early noted that the school should continue to be "a positive, helpful, and friendly environment."

#### Staff Pre Interviews:

The data from the staff pre interviews served to support much of the survey data. All six of the teachers identified challenges with parent knowledge about what they could be doing, a lack of formal structure or school organization for parent involvement, as well as busy and stretched parent schedules.

#### *Parent Knowledge*

Mrs. Brown noted a number of circumstances related to parent knowledge. Given her role as a kindergarten teacher, it did not surprise the researcher that she continued to focus on this as a challenge to a parent involvement program. She noted times when parents "did not know they could come to school and ask for help" and instances when she "gave parents suggestions" about at home learning support, but she was not sure that "they understood the importance" of the suggestion. Along that same topic she stated, "Sometimes you give parents things to work on with their kids and they have a hard time doing it because they have no foundation with it." Mrs. Brown believed that the school

could and should do more to help assist parents who are working with their children at home.

Mrs. Hayes also mentioned helping parents to understand what they can do with their child. She noted that there should be more “curriculum information for parents and grade level expectations that could help the parent to prepare the child for the beginning of school.” She stated that parents need to know that they should monitor their child’s homework and help them study. Mrs. Adam’s statements served to reinforce those of Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Hayes. She stated, “I do not know if they [parents] don’t know how to help or if they are just too busy. The parents need to show that school is important for the kids to get it.” Mrs. Adams also felt that having volunteers in the classroom was very beneficial. “I think it is a good thing to get people in here because they see how you teach.”

Mrs. Smith noted how parents may need to help their child at home but “if the child asks for help then the parent has to explain that sometimes the way things are in the classroom is different from the methods they were taught.” Mrs. Hunter stated “we need to make sure everyone buys into the way the system works. I don’t think we do enough of it. Parents need more exposure to what we are teaching their children.” Mrs. Early spoke about making sure each teacher lets parents know that it is ok to ask questions. “Sometimes parents don’t want to seem like they don’t know.” She believed that teachers need to explain content or teaching strategies to parents, because “it might not be something that people would ordinarily know.”

### *Program Structure*

A lack of formalized structure for a parent involvement program was also referenced in the pre interviews as a challenge to the creation of a parent involvement program. Mrs. Brown stated that she believed a structured program would help. She stated that “parents are interested in learning how to become involved but that there is not a lot of structure for it right now. I think we need to do more.” She believed that speakers could help especially with behavioral problems because she thinks some parents “really need that guidance.” She went on to state “sometimes now a days parents don’t know who is there to help them.” While she referenced the school getting better at outreach to parents she believed that more could be done, especially by using the website as a tool for parents; not just for informational purposes but also to provide games and things for parents to do with their child. Additionally, she suggested a more enhanced kindergarten orientation program.

Mrs. Hayes also believed that there could be better outreach from the school to parents. She suggested offering music and art programs to encourage creativity and that “family newsletters regarding future events would be helpful.” Mrs. Adams saw a need for developing a welcoming school and classroom environment. She believed encouraging parents to come into the classroom would also help to build trust in the school. “The more we can get parents in here the better and the more informed they will be. If we don’t talk to them and let them know what’s going on, how are you going to make it better for the child?” Mrs. Smith noted that the school could try to get parents more involved and that parents “need to feel welcome.”

Mrs. Hunter stated that she thought encouraging more volunteers to come into the school and classrooms would be very helpful to a parent involvement program. She also believed a more structured newsletter would provide needed information to parents. She again referenced her previously stated belief that the school must be an inviting and welcoming place. Mrs. Early noted that the welcoming environment is critical to increasing parent involvement.

#### *Parent Schedules*

Most of the participants, in one way or another referenced parent schedules and additional obligations as a challenge to a parent involvement program. Mrs. Hayes and Mrs. Adams noted that parents are encouraged to volunteer in various activities in the school and are also encouraged to join the PTA. Mrs. Adams stated, however, “I know how people are in their busy lives.” Mrs. Smith stated, “There are some years that you will get an overwhelming response for parent involvement. There are other years when it will be barren.” With regard to why some years have fewer parents involved she stated, “They are all working; both parents are working and they have to look after other siblings. They don’t have the time.” In reference to at home parent involvement Mrs. Smith suggested, “some parents are already juggling two jobs, they are juggling children and they are juggling trying to get to the grocery store and put a meal on the table.” Mrs. Early noted that the PTA tries to get people involved but “I think people are busy.”

#### *Classroom Parent Involvement Logs:*

The classroom parent involvement log data represented a number of challenges facing the creation of parent involvement program. The researcher concluded that one major challenge was rooted in the various understandings of what a parent involvement

program is. An additional challenge presented from the logs related to the actual classroom activities that offered an opportunity for parent involvement.

As had been referenced previously, there were a large number of parent involvement instances based on the four categories used for the project. The greatest number of activities related to communication either school to home or home to school. Looking at the total 1044 documented occurrences provided interesting data that supported the idea that even as the teachers worked from the same definitions of parent involvement, there was a variety in interpretation of the categories. While all of the teachers had the largest amount of activity in the Communicating category, there were major differences in other categories, primarily Parenting and Learning at Home. Mrs. Hayes indicated that many of her Communicating activity also dealt with Parenting. Given that most of the communicating was of a similar nature to that listed by the other teachers, it was clear Mrs. Hayes interpreted these activities as being more connected to parenting than any of the other teachers.

The same question emerged when looking at the Learning at Home category. The occurrences listed ranged from zero to 66 instances and represented zero to 26% of a teacher's total activity. A review of the parent involvement log highlighted that the same type of activity was categorized differently by the teachers. The researcher concluded that based on the teacher's prior beliefs and current understanding about parent involvement and what that means; there can be great discrepancies in how someone interpreted parent involvement.

When looking at the teacher initiation of parent involvement, additional conclusions were drawn from the data analysis. Given that Volunteering represented the smallest

amount of activity and that none of the Volunteering instances were teacher initiated, the researcher concluded that more would need to be done to encourage parents to volunteer, at least at the classroom level. Learning at Home also indicated that a number of these communications were parent initiated. The researcher concluded that if the classroom teacher was most interested in encouraging the learning at home parent involvement, than they would need to more aggressively inform parents of ways this could be done.

*Teacher Monthly Reflection Prompts:*

The teacher monthly reflection prompts offered additional data that highlighted the challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program. This data served to buttress much of the earlier data discussed. The challenges identified from the monthly reflection prompts included parent and teacher time limits, a need to educate the parents and teachers about the importance of parent involvement, and a parent involvement program that was coordinated and welcoming.

Mrs. Hayes continued to articulate her desire to have parents volunteer in the classroom but also noted that parent work schedules could keep them from doing so. She suggested that the school offer a variety of activities at different times during the day so as to maximize involvement. She also believed that more social or fun activities would help to encourage attendance at these activities. Further, Mrs. Hayes stated that she was aware that she communicated often with the same parents.

Mrs. Brown noted that she was aware of all the communicating that she did and noticed that she tended to communicate with some of the same parents. Mrs. Adams stated that for her, “communicating was the easiest form of parent involvement with people working and with their busy lives.” Additionally, she stated, “I find that most

parents work so it is hard for them to come into school.” She also noted “it is interesting to see how much and which parents are actively in their child’s life.”

Mrs. Smith stated that she became more aware of “which parents are involved in their child’s education.” She also stated, however, that she was aware she communicated with certain parents more than others. “Too often we take certain students and parents for granted.” Mrs. Hunter noted that with parents working, the agenda served as a good communication tool. Additionally she stated that “following teacher initiated communication parents are usually responsive and actively involved.” She also referenced how she used to write a monthly newsletter for parents but that when time became a challenge, she stopped doing it. She commented that she would like to start it back up again. Mrs. Early believed that communication to all parents was “key” and that activities scheduled at different times, such as afternoons instead of evenings, may help to encourage participation.

These findings serve to support the belief that with limited time, teachers will communicate with the parents that force their engagement. It also identified a teacher awareness that offering school based parent involvement at different times may yield greater participation.

The monthly reflection prompts served to highlight the need for enhanced parent education as well as professional development for teachers related to parent involvement. Mrs. Hayes stated that she believed professional development for teachers and training for parents would both be helpful. “Curriculum could be discussed at a PTA meeting, kindergarten orientation, or open house night.” She noted that “some parents have indicated that they don’t know the letter sounds or current math vocabulary terms. They

want to help their children but aren't sure how to teach them.”

Mrs. Brown believed that “by letting parents know areas that children need to practice, the students improve.” She also believed that “some parents have a better understanding of education” and those may be the parents that get more involved. In reference to professional development Mrs. Smith felt that it would be helpful. “Sometimes just talking and listening to other teachers and listening to ideas they used to get parents involved is the best way to polish our techniques.” For parent education, Mrs. Hunter suggested “the creation of a booklet of math strategies for parents. The purpose is to give parents a list of strategies taught in school which they can reinforce at home with their child.” For teachers and parents, she suggested “an open discussion and grade level meetings” that would encourage academic support of the children. Mrs. Early suggested training for teachers around involving parents as well as educational programs for the parents.

The previously discussed challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program, primarily time, schedule constraints, and necessary training for both teachers and parents may be eased by the coordination of a parent involvement program by an individual or group of individuals who would make the parents feel welcome. Many of the teachers referenced the need to have someone coordinate a program. Without this coordination, it could be difficult to create an effective program.

Mrs. Brown felt that a parent involvement coordinator, who would help to organize the program would allow the program “to go smoother”. Further, she believed that this program must recognize that “parents need to feel welcome.” Given that Mrs. Adams believed “parent involvement should be encouraged from the first day of school,” it was

not surprising to the researcher that she felt someone to coordinate the volunteers and help the parents to feel welcome into the school or their child's classroom would be an asset to the program. Mrs. Smith also felt that someone to coordinate volunteers would diminish some of the challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program. She believed that, "from administrators to classroom teachers, parents must get the feeling that they are welcome in the school and in the classroom; and that they are a vital partner in their child's education."

*Post Project Interviews:*

The post project interview data primarily served to identify what the teachers considered their most prolific type of involvement; communicating. All of the participants noted just how much communication occurred between their classroom and individual students. There were no references, however, to specific challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program. A number of the teachers, although not all of them, did note that they enjoyed working together and learning from each other. This lack of working together was interpreted as a challenge to the creation of a program, especially in light of the previous data suggesting that a program be coordinated and that teachers could benefit from professional development together.

**Data Analysis**

The findings related to the challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program served as a way to reinforce many of the previous findings. The challenges that emerged emanated from the parent, the classroom and teacher, as well as the school itself. They involved limited time on behalf of the parent and the teacher, a classroom and school structure that may not welcome or support parent involvement, as well as an

education or training issue for parents, so that they may understand the necessity of parent involvement. It was also suggested that teachers would benefit from professional development in the area of parent involvement.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter IV began with an overview of the case study site, the participants, and the research questions. The findings in Chapter IV were reported by research question and presented based on themes and patterns that emerged from an analysis of the data. The data instruments used included staff surveys, pre project interviews, classroom parent involvement logs, teacher monthly reflections, and post project interviews. The final chapter of this study will present a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings, limitations to the study, implications for practice, implications for policy, implications for further research, and leadership lessons.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS

#### *Introduction*

The final chapter of the study summarizes and discusses the information that was presented in the previous chapters. The summary of the findings will be presented by research question and serves to present the answers to these questions. This section will be followed by a discussion of the findings as they relate to the theories and research presented in Chapter Two. Additionally, there will be a discussion of the limitations of the study. The following three sections will consider the implications of the study for practice and policy as well the implications for further research. Finally, the chapter will present a section on leadership lessons and a conclusion.

#### *Summary of the Findings*

The qualitative case study focused on the following research questions:

1. What are the components of an effective K-2 parent involvement program?
2. In what ways does the initiation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program affect teacher practices?
3. How has participation in the project impacted teacher beliefs about parental involvement?
4. What were the challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program?

#### *1. What are the components of an effective K-2 parent involvement program?*

An important finding from question one and related to the components of an effective K-2 parent involvement program was that teachers believed communication was

the greatest parent involvement activity that occurred on a regular basis. The researcher noted that throughout the course of the study, the teachers continued to focus on communication as the most important element of parent involvement. This was interpreted to mean communication from both school to home and home to school. An additional finding highlighted the need for the school to do better outreach and encouragement as a way to get parents more involved. The teachers stated, that as the project continued, they noticed the same parents were doing much of the communicating with the teachers. The participant teachers believed that they must do a better job at engaging all of the parents, by reaching out to the parents and encouraging them to become involved. This was often noted in relation to the teacher feeling that they had to suggest to parents ways that they may be able to get more involved. It was suggested by three of the six teachers that the connection between home and school could be enhanced through the use of technology.

The findings also suggested that a parent involvement program could not be effective if the school and classroom did not display a welcoming environment. This finding lead the researcher to conclude that some of the teachers believed the school currently did not appear welcoming to all parents. However, all of the teachers themselves did believe that they had a welcoming classroom environment but they were not able to confirm that this existed throughout the entire school.

In a related finding, the teachers cited the need to offer workshops, trainings, or other forums to help inform parents about the need for parent involvement as well as ways for the parents to become involved, through both school based and home based activities. A

final finding suggested that a person to help coordinate a parent involvement program or activities would help to support a more effective K-2 parent involvement program.

*2. In what ways does the initiation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program affect teacher practices?*

There were a number of interesting findings related to question two and how participation in the project may have impacted teacher practices. A primary finding was the awareness of all the teachers that they needed to communicate with all parents. This was highlighted in many of their reflections as well as in increases of activities that connected the school to the home including positive notes for children, special activities, and outreach to the parents on behalf of the teachers. The increased parent involvement over the second half of the project, by four of the six teachers, served to support the notion that teachers were in fact increasing parent involvement activity as the project progressed.

An additional finding related to teacher practices was an awareness of the desire to offer training or education to parents about the need for parent involvement. All of teachers noted that they were being contacted regularly by many of the same parents. The teachers believed more parents (not just the ones they were not constantly hearing from) would become involved if they knew of the importance of involvement to their child's educational achievement. A number of teachers (four of the six) worked to raise this awareness in their own classroom by reaching out to parents of all their students and working to encourage more involvement.

Three of the teachers in the project described improved academic performance for a number of students in their classroom, following contact by the teacher to the parent. The

teacher reflections indicated that once the parents knew of the concern, and the parents communicated with the teacher, then the student showed improvements. This finding may also be linked to the need to inform parents of the significance of parent involvement especially for students with academic needs.

An additional finding related to teacher practices involved working with colleagues on this specific parent involvement project. A number of the teacher participants felt that they had professionally benefited from working with others. Teachers commented that they learned from other teachers and that they valued the opportunity to work with colleagues on the subject of parent involvement. They felt that being part of a team allowed them to learn and implement new ideas in their practice.

*3. How has participation in the project impacted teacher beliefs about parental involvement?*

Findings affiliated with question three seemed to highlight the major conclusion that participation in the project primarily served to reinforce teacher beliefs about parent involvement. The teachers believed from the beginning of the project that parent involvement was very important, and their beliefs did not change. What the findings indicate however, was that over time there may have been a broader understanding of what was meant by the term “parent involvement.”

The teachers also reflected on their own outreach to parents. An additional finding illuminated how the teachers’ original beliefs about the level of parent involvement were based primarily on the communications that came from parents to the school. As the project continued a number teachers started to believe that they were only communicating with the parents that engaged them and that they, the teachers, could be doing more to get

the involvement of all parents. All of the teachers noted the positive responses from the parents with regard to an enhanced communication from the teacher and a few came to believe that their connection to the parents resulted in gains for the child.

*4. What were the challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program?*

The final question related to challenges facing the creation of a parent involvement program. The findings indicated that there may be a number of challenges facing the creation of such a program. Some of these were time constraints for teachers and parents, an uncoordinated school based program, a school environment that does not welcome all parents or encourage their involvement, as well as education for parents with regard to the significance of parent involvement. A lack of teacher desire to work with colleagues to support a school wide program or the teachers' lack of understanding of how important parent involvement is, were also seen as relevant challenges to the creation of a parent involvement program.

*Discussion of the Findings*

The Discussion of the findings will examine the study data as it relates to the research themes presented in Chapter 2. The literature themes included a discussion of current state and federal legal mandates regarding parent involvement as well as a review of literature discussing adult learning, teacher professional development and preservice teacher preparation with regard to parent involvement. Two additional themes included the research on the various definitions and descriptions of parent involvement and a review the connections between parent involvement and student achievement. A Final theme reviewed literature related to how and why parents become involved in their child's education.

### Legal Mandates Regarding Parent Involvement

The field of K-12 public education has a number of legal guidelines as well as numerous public policy goals that address the need for parents to be involved with their children's education. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 as well as the Massachusetts Education Reform Act 1993 both provide requirements and recommendations for parents to be involved with their child's education. In the No Child Left Behind Act, The United States Department of Education describes Title I parent involvement as "affording parents substantial and meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children" (United States Department of Education, 2004). Further, the law, Section 1118 (e) goes on to state that the school:

Shall provide materials and training to help parents to work with their children to improve their children's achievement, such as literacy training and using technology, as appropriate, to foster parental involvement. [Also, the school] shall educate teachers, pupil service personnel, principals, and other staff, with the assistance of parents, in the value and utility of contributions of parents, and in how to reach out, communicate with, and work with parents as equal partners, implement and coordinate parent programs, and build ties between parents and the school. (United States Department of Education, 2004)

Throughout the course of the project, the teachers came to realize the necessity of training parents, as well as other teachers, to increase effective parent involvement. The Massachusetts Education Reform Act stipulated the creation of an Advisory Council for Parent and Community Involvement and Education. This Council recommends that there needs to be meaningful communication between home and school, that parents and

families need to feel welcome in the school, and that training and education could help the teachers to work more effectively with parents and families (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1993b).

Initially, the teachers felt that the parents who were involved chose to be involved and that the other parents may not care about their child's education. As the project continued, all of the teachers came to realize that that the school, and indeed they, needed to do more to attract the parents who may seem to be uninterested. The teachers identified training, workshops and education as a way to enhance knowledge about parent involvement for both parents and school staff. This lack of understanding of the need for parent involvement, on behalf of some parents and teachers, was also seen as a challenge to creating an effective parent involvement program.

Equally as important to the creation of a parent involvement program was the need to have parents feel welcome in the school. It is clear that both No Child Left Behind and the Massachusetts Education Reform Act believe that this barrier to involvement can not be accepted and that the school must work to mitigate this problem. The teachers were also in full agreement with this notion. This need for a welcoming environment was referenced a number of times and believed to be critical to a successful program.

### Adult Learning

The current literature on adult learning, primarily professional development and teacher collaboration, highlights the need for teachers to work together as a way to fully maximize professional development and training in an era of reform (Little, 1993). The research also indicates that adults must have the self concept of being a learner and feel that there is a need to engage in learning (Knowles, 2005). All of these ideas, illuminated

through current research, relate to the findings from this study. Over the course of the study the teachers expressed a number of ideas regarding working together on the project. A few of the teachers believed that working with other colleagues around parent involvement helped them to clarify some questions as well as get ideas from others. Also present was the desire of some teachers to learn more themselves or help others to learn more about parent involvement.

One of Knowles (2005) six principles of adult learning (androgogy) is the *role of the learners' experiences*. This principle is based on the belief that the adult learner brings to any situation personal experiences based on their upbringing, background, and age. The teachers in the study expressed beliefs that were in large part based on their own experiences. Some teachers spoke about their work with certain families or children and how they could tell the level of parent involvement that occurred from the home. What is interesting about this principle is how it may also be applied to the parents themselves. As adults, parents will bring their own beliefs and perceptions to the need for parent involvement and what that involvement may look like. In understanding the role that experience plays for adult learners, the initiation and implementation of any parent involvement program would need to be aware of this paradigm for teachers and parents and consider the importance of life experience in the implementation process.

In having the teachers work together as part of the parent involvement team, there was a genuine opportunity for collaboration to support better and more effective parent involvement. While some of the teachers found this opportunity valuable, others did not. It was clear to the researcher that the current working environment did not support collaboration or strong collegiality and therefore it was an obvious struggle for some. The

school culture did not nourish strong parent involvement, thus the teachers and parents were not focused on this issue. As Barth described, you will know there is collegiality when you observe “people talking with one another about practice” (Barth, 2006, p.11). In order to have teachers working together to create an effective parent involvement program, collegiality and collaboration would need to be supported and encouraged within the school, especially by the school leadership. The teachers in the study had a very genuine desire to enhance parent involvement and worked to support this need in their own individual classrooms. There was an absence of a structured system that allowed them to work together and with other staff members to truly enhance and expand an effective parent involvement program. Any training that would be done, for either teachers or parents would need to consider the principles of adult learning and understand that relevance of information is critical.

A number of the recommended practices for preservice teachers, with regard to parent involvement, would help in the implementation of an effective parent involvement program. As the current literature indicates, there is not a large focus put on the subject of parent involvement in teacher preparation programs. As a result of this, in most cases teachers enter the classroom with limited research based knowledge about parent involvement. Given that the teachers in the study noted that their understanding of parent involvement was based primarily on personal experience in the classroom, effective training in this area may serve to expand a teacher’s repertoire with parent involvement initiatives. Some of these suggested models include guest speakers, role playing, case study method, research with families and teacher self reflection (Shartrand, et al. 1997). Given that parent involvement has been identified as a key component in a child’s

education, effective applicable training and professional development for all staff would be very beneficial.

### Definitions and Descriptions of Parent Involvement

In practice, parent involvement has been defined as representing many different parental behaviors and parenting practices including communication with school, communication with the child about school, parent aspirations for the child, and home routines to support learning (Fan and Chen, 2001). As a result of these varying definitions, there can be confusion amongst school staff and parents as to exactly what parent involvement means. As part of the study, a specific set of definitions was used as a way to help clarify these descriptions and to provide a common language to be used. The definitions selected were based on Dr. Joyce Epstein's six types of parent involvement paradigm (Epstein, 1995). The four used in the study were:

Parenting: Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.

Communicating: Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.

Volunteering: Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.

Learning at home: Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions.

The goal was to provide these common definitions and descriptions as a way to help identify the types of parent involvement that were occurring in the sample classrooms.

Throughout the study the teachers overwhelmingly identified communicating as the primary and most common form of parent involvement that was occurring. This held true for all six teachers. In addition, as the project continued, there was a larger number of learning at home occurrences that were documented. What was occurring less, were parent involvement activities in the parenting and volunteering categories. Even with the common language and descriptions, the data suggested that some of the teachers had interpreted these categories differently. This data highlighted the need to clarify exactly what is meant by parent involvement, especially if a school is interested in implementing an active and successful program.

The differences between school based parent involvement and home based parent involvement have been discussed in current research literature. The concept of home based parent involvement and its impact on a child's education emanated from this study as well. When trying to document and understand the types of parent involvement that were occurring, it was easier for the teachers to note the school based parent involvement (notes to and from school, special activity bulletins, newsletters, and classroom volunteering) than it was to document the home based parent involvement. In some instances homework completion and parent generated communications did highlight home based activities. What is important to note was that the teachers seemed to make some assumptions about parent involvement based on the presence of school based parent involvement. Given that literature has identified home based parent involvement as activity happening outside of the school day (Epstein (1995), Singh (1995), Ho Sui-Chu

and Willms (1996), Fan and Chen (2001)) it was a challenge for the teachers to be aware of all that was going on outside of the school. In some cases they believed that the parents were not “involved” or “did not care,” when there was truly no way to confirm this because the involvement may have been occurring elsewhere and this involvement was not communicated to the teacher by the parent.

Throughout the study, the teachers identified cases where successful parent involvement had a positive effect on a child’s learning. This involvement was noted by the teacher following some type of communication with the parent. In some instances it was parent generated and in some cases it was teacher generated communication. This finding brings to question the impact of expectations. While there is no way to confirm this, Marcon (1999) raised the same question in her study on preschool parent involvement. She did establish that the more active parent involvement the greater gains for the children (Marcon, 1999). She noted:

The exact mechanisms of this notable influence are unclear, making it difficult to determine whether teacher perceptions or actual child changes or some unidentified third variables are the source of higher ratings of children whose parents are more involved. It is possible that teachers rated children higher as a result of familiarity with parents who appeared to be more interested in their children’s education. Such parent interest may have influenced teachers’ willingness to work with children, resulting in an enriched school experience for those in the high parent involvement group. (p. 5)

Given that there are parents who may appear to the teacher as being uninvolved, a consideration of this potential challenge must be considered. The data from the study

generated a recommendation for parent training about the importance of parent involvement as well the different types of parent involvement that may help a child in school. It would be important for a school to understand this potential bias before they entered into a parent training program.

### *Parent Involvement and Student Achievement*

The current research indicates that parent involvement can have a positive effect on student achievement. This involvement may support success in a number of ways including higher grades and test scores, improved behavior, better attendance, and enrollment in post secondary education (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Throughout the study there was a good deal of data to support the link between parent involvement and student achievement. One of the findings indicated that in a number of instances, once a parent was notified of a problem, and given suggestions as to how to help the child, the academic performance of that child showed improvement.

The teachers also indicated that they spent much of their time communicating with the same parents. In some cases, it was a small group of parents. This occurred in all of the study's classrooms. As the project progressed the teachers were noting that they were spending a great deal of time with these select parents and that they needed to reach out to parents they did not hear from constantly. As the teachers did better outreach, they were able to get more parents involved. This outreach to parents is a critical finding, especially as research indicates that it is the work and home and learning at home activities that have the greatest impact on student achievement and not simply attending activities at school.

Ho Shi-Chu and Willms (1996) state:

Schools did differ significantly in levels of involvement associated with participation as volunteers or attendance at PTO meetings, but this type of involvement had only a modest effect on reading achievement and a negligible effect on mathematics achievement. It was involvement at home, particularly in discussing school activities and helping children plan their programs, that had the strongest relationship to academic achievement. (p. 137)

With the teachers making efforts to connect with less represented parents, there would likely be a more visible link between home based parent involvement and achievement. In two of the classrooms, the teachers actually sent home academic communications to every parent as a way to connect the school activities to the home. The sole purpose of the communication was to draw the parents' attention to the need for involvement outside of the school day. Some of the teachers felt that the school needed to play a more active role in highlighting this need for parents as well as supporting parents as they work with their child at home.

The data from the study also indicated that all of the teachers believed early parent involvement was significant to the child's current success and continued achievement as they grew older. The teachers' identification of the significance of early parent involvement was not surprising to the researcher given that sample classrooms were in grades kindergarten, one and two. Research supports this theory. Miedel and Reynolds (1999) conclude, "even after controlling for family background, the number of activities in which parents participated in preschool and kindergarten was significantly associated with higher reading achievement, with lower rates of grade retention at age

14 (eighth grade), and with fewer years in special education” (p. 379). Additionally, Bernard (2004) concluded, that while parents and teachers reported instances of involvement somewhat differently, there was a positive connection established between parent involvement in the early grades and successfully finishing high school.

### *Why and How Parents Get Involved in Their Child's Education*

As schools seek to involve parents as a way to increase student engagement, family engagement, and student achievement, it is critical for the schools to review what they do to support parents and how they display, through their actions, their commitment to parent involvement. Parents become involved in their children's education in a number of ways. This involvement is often impacted by school and teacher practices, student age or course and subject expectations, and social issues or personal beliefs embraced by parents, students, and school personnel (Colman, 1991; Epstein and Dauber, 1991; Eccles and Harold, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995; Lareau and Horvat, 1999; Chavkin, 2000; Feuerstein, 2000; Mapp 2003; Souto-Manning and Swick, 2006 ). A school committed to creating partnerships with families, must also be aware of any possible language, beliefs, or actions that will send negative messages to parents and dissuade them from becoming involved.

At the beginning of the project, most of the teachers believed they knew why parents were involved with their child's education. Most of the teachers felt that these parents were ones “who cared” or “understood the importance” of their involvement. As the project progressed however, a number of the teachers noted some other reasons that parents may not be involved, at least as the teachers framed the concept of involvement. There were numerous data indicating that teachers felt many parents did not have time to

become more involved. Some also felt that there were parents who were unaware of how to get involved, and some teachers believed the school had not done a very good job at welcoming parents. As a way to rectify this, the teachers suggested the school do a better job at informing parents about opportunities as well as creating a welcoming and supportive school environment.

A research study done by Karen Mapp (2003) identified a number of the same issues illuminated by the teachers in this study and their similarities were worth noting. A goal of Mapp's research was to "investigate factors that influenced parents' involvement in their children's education in an attempt to understand the motivations, incentives, expectations, and apprehensions influencing parents' participation in their children's educational development" (p. 38). Mapp's findings indicate that "parents expressed a genuine and deep seated desire to help their children succeed in school. Parents wanted their children to succeed academically and were motivated to do what they could to ensure their children's academic success" (Mapp, 2003, p. 42). The findings generated from the data collected at Fletcher Elementary School indicate many of these same beliefs. The teachers noted that many of their parents were interested in helping their children. While they expressed frustration at some of the parents who did not become involved, there was a general awareness that there may be factors at play that were keeping them from being more involved.

In Mapp's research, the parents also identified both "social" and "school" factors that influenced their involvement. The parents articulated that their own school experiences and histories had an impact on their involvement, as did time commitments, other responsibilities and cultural norms and values (Mapp, 2003). Similar findings generated

based on teacher perceptions and beliefs, also emerged from the current study. The teachers noted that certain parents who were more “school aware” or who had children with unique needs seemed to engage the teacher more than other parents. As they continued to collect data and reflect on their practices, many of the teachers saw a pattern emerge. By the mid point of the project, the teachers were becoming aware of their need to do outreach to all of the parents and not just the ones who were engaging them. There were also emerging beliefs that parents may have other responsibilities and time commitments that kept them from becoming more involved.

An additional finding related to Mapp’s research focused on the need for parents to feel welcome and supported in the school. Every teacher in this study believed that their own classroom provided a welcoming and comfortable environment. However, they could not agree that the broader “school” climate was welcoming to all parents. Most of the teachers did note that things had gotten better over time, but that there was still quite a long way to go. The parents in Mapp’s study seem to validate the Fletcher teacher beliefs, in that they also believed that a strong relationship with the school personnel (and one that displayed respect for the parents) helped encourage their participation. “When school staff engage in caring and trustful relationships with parents that recognize parents as partners in the educational development of children, these relationships enhance parents’ desire to be involved” (Mapp, 2003, p.55).

A final finding related to why and how parents get involved in their child’s education emerges from the teachers’ belief that the school could provide training and information for parents. This training would include an explanation of why they should get involved and provide options for how they can get involved. As was discussed previously, parents

get involved for many reasons. Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler (1995) asserted that there were multiple reasons and factors that parents became involved in their child's education. They believe:

Parents become involved primarily because (a) they develop a personal construction of the parental role that includes participation in their children's education, (b) they have developed a positive sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school and (c) they perceive opportunities or demands for involvement from children and the school. (p. 310)

The teachers in this study concluded that there could be a variety of reasons why parents did or did not get involved. While words such as efficacy and role construction were not used by the teachers in the study, much of their reflection data references the ideas embedded in those phrases. There was a belief by most of the teachers that parents needed to be invited, feel welcomed, and be given an opportunity to become involved. For the parents who did not seem involved, the teachers often summarized that they did not know what they should or could be doing with their children, especially at home.

A summary of the findings indicates that teachers do value parent involvement and that they believe they encourage this involvement in their classroom. As research has noted, the definitions and descriptions of parent involvement may have an impact on teacher and parent beliefs regarding the subject. The teachers in this study identified many challenges to the creation of a parent involvement program and highlighted the school based initiatives that they felt would enhance parent involvement and that may lead to academic or social gains for their students. The next section of the chapter will present the limitations of the study.

### *Limitations to the Study*

There were a number of limitations to this study. These limitations included the small sample size, the unique demographic of the study site, the potential for researcher or participant bias, and the short duration of the study.

Given that the study was conducted with six teachers in a small rural school district, it is possible that the findings may not be easily generalizable to other districts looking to create a K-2 parent involvement program. This lack of generalizability is a threat to external validity (Merriam, 1998).

An additional limitation was related to the project coordinator's role as superintendent. The study participants were given all goals for this study and the data collection information. They were also given information regarding confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the project. Every effort was made to ensure teachers that they should not feel pressured into agreeing to be part of the study. However, "ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to the collection of data and in the dissemination of findings. Overlaying both the collection of data and the dissemination of findings is the researcher-participant relationship" (Merriam, 1998, p. 213).

Researcher bias could also be considered a limitation of the study. As the researcher spent time reviewing literature and establishing the study methodology, it was possible that the researcher interpreted data in such a way as to support the original hypotheses.

Participant bias may also have been a limitation. Since all of the data was collected by teachers who were documenting events in their own classrooms, there was potential for the teachers to want the data to indicate only successful activities.

"Instrumentation may also be a limitation and threat to internal validity" (Gay, 2006,

p. 239). All data collection instruments were created by the researcher, and may therefore have been crafted in such a way as to limit findings or encourage participants to collect data in a specific way. This was not the intent of the researcher, but may still be considered a limitation. A final significant limitation was related to the timetable of the data collection. The study included data collected over a six month period, in one particular school year.

### *Implications and Recommendations for Practice*

Currently the work done in schools is work that has grown far more challenging and complex over time. Given the current focus on accountability and standards coupled with an increasingly diverse population and ever expanding international economy, a sense of urgency has emerged as we talk about preparing our children for participation in the world. If schools under the current structure are to meet this challenge, they cannot do it alone. Parents and schools must work together to help support the learning of young citizens.

This study demonstrated that there are a number of parent involvement activities that occur on a daily basis at Fletcher Elementary School but that there is no coordination at either the school or grade level. Teachers must operate within the confines of their classrooms and often work alone to figure out what types of parent involvement are needed. Given this finding, it is suggested that the school consider taking on a school wide initiative to promote effective parent involvement. As the teachers in the study suggested, there could be a school wide coordinator who could serve as the school based parent liaison and work with the teachers to promote in-school parent involvement. This commitment by the school would be publicly noted as it would require additional

resources. Or the principal could take on this project as her goals for the year. Where you put your money tells a lot about what your priorities are in a district.

A school would also need to delve deeply into professional development in the area of parent involvement. As this study indicated, every teacher, in every classroom has an idea of what parent involvement means and should look like. This study as well as additional research indicates that if parent involvement is truly valued and encouraged, then there needs to be a common understanding of what this means and what this looks like on a daily basis. Without this understanding, there can be confusion as to what is happening and how effective it is.

Professional development would also help the teachers to engage in reflection about their own practice. As research has indicated, there is little attention given to parent involvement in teacher licensing programs (Hiatt-Michael, 2001, Chavkin and Williams, 1988) and the beliefs that teachers have about parent involvement are usually based on their personal experience. Teaching can be a profession that isolates practitioners from each other based on schedules and systems in place. Professional development that is sustained and done with a large group or whole staff around a specific topic can create a rich opportunity for reflection and growth. Norms and practices that are learned as a result of this professional development could transfer over to other team-based initiatives and serve as a model for other schools.

Additional recommendations for practice would be to have the school offer workshops on parent involvement for the community. Given that the data from this study would indicate that all teachers believe parents want the best for their children but that the parents may not know exactly how to help them with school work, informational sessions

could serve a meaningful purpose. These trainings or workshops could be run by teachers in the building as a way to have parents access teachers in a different way. Experts or professionals from other districts may also serve as resources. The goal of such a program would be to allow parents a safe and respectful environment to ask questions or seek help from teachers as they work at home with their children. Curriculum and instruction could be reviewed and parents could be given an opportunity to try things and then come to a follow up session to report out if they chose. In order for this to be successful teachers and school leadership would need to truly embrace this model and support the needs of all parents. They would need to be committed to outreach as a way to engage all parents. Given the complexities of schedules there would need to be multiple time offerings and even consideration of technology based programming such as on line course or webinars.

A final recommendation for practice is to have the school present a welcoming, supportive, and respectful environment; from the office, to the classroom, to the cafeteria and playground. While this would hold true for work with parents, it is also applicable to all members of the school community. If the climate of the school is positive and understanding of differences, than there will be an eagerness to be part of that community. By offering parents the opportunity to be part of a caring, supportive school it will help them want to become more involved and ultimately feel positive about the school that their child attends.

#### *Implications for Policy*

There are a number of current policies, both State and Federal, that encourage or mandate parent involvement in schools. However, in many instances these are policies

that are written to meet compliance goals only. If schools were truly engaged in a policy that encouraged or required parent involvement, then there would be many more instances of successful programs. Given the busy schedules that people now have and the very “full plate” of the schools, policy goals that address parent involvement must serve as a way to “add value” to the work that is already being done.

A school system that was genuinely interested in engaging parents and creating an effective parent involvement program would make this a focal point of the work they do. It would be stated publicly at every opportunity and the School Board would embrace effective parent involvement as a district goal. Policy would require that parents be involved in decision making at every level and that they be given multiple opportunities to become involved. While it may be easy to come up with policies that say we embrace parent involvement, the challenge truly lies in moving the words from paper into action. When we get to a point where parent involvement is something that we just do, and not seen as another add on to the day, than we will know we have a successful, living parent involvement policy.

#### *Implications for Further Research*

This study focused on the initiation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program. It looked at current parent involvement practices in six classrooms in a small rural school district. While the study generated interesting findings, there are many other facets of the topic that could be explored in future research. The following research recommendations would enhance the current literature on parent involvement:

1. This study was conducted over the course of one school year and actually collected data for less time than that. A study that looked at the topic of K-2

- parent involvement for a longer period of time may generate data that could help support enhanced parent involvement. A study that expanded the grade levels as well could provide helpful information.
2. A study that looked at the connection between parent involvement and achievement would greatly benefit the educational community. As raising student achievement is seen as a primary goal of the work being done in schools, a study that examined the connections between parent involvement and achievement, especially in a rural context, could benefit those working in the field of parent involvement.
  3. Professional development and its impact on parent involvement practices would serve as a valuable research topic. Since we know that the classroom teachers are on the front lines with regard to parent involvement, it may be very beneficial to study the impact of specific training and professional development related to the topic of parent involvement. This could be done in multiple settings and at multiple grade levels and provide interesting data to the academic community and to school practitioners.
  4. A final recommendation for future research would look at parent involvement from the parent perspective. As this study did not seek the input of parents, one that would document and evaluate parent involvement from a parent viewpoint could contribute helpful suggestions to schools. Gathering data from parents would also reflect an important value of parent perceptions.

### *Leadership Lessons*

As I reflect on my own leadership during the project I think about many things. First, the project provided me a wonderful opportunity to work with elementary teachers, most of whom I had not ever directly worked with. I learned so much about the unique needs of children in grades K-2 as well as the special commitment that teachers have to this age group. This project provided a wonderful learning experience for me and one that left me even more committed to engaging parents in meaningful and respectful ways.

When I started the Leadership Project, I knew what I wanted the focus to be; and that was looking at creating a Parent Involvement Program. It was not that there wasn't some parent involvement happening at the school, but rather, it wasn't talked about as a "value" or something we think about on a regular basis. Some families became involved through their own initiative (PTA, volunteering, etc.) but most were not involved in any formal way. With the concerns in the district about dropouts and disengaged students, I was sure a program or at least a stated philosophy would help us address some of the underlying causes of these problem. If we could invite parents to become involved in our school, in a very proactive way, and allow them access to the many supports we offer, then perhaps that could transfer over to the classroom. I was also sure that teachers would be willing to work more aggressively with families, as I believed they all thought parent involvement was important for student success.

As I needed to clarify exactly what the leadership project would entail, I really had to focus on the age group that I thought would be a good starting point. While I had spent all my teaching and administrative time in middle or high school, it seemed to me that I should focus on the earlier grades as a way to start family involvement, from the very

beginning of a child's formal schooling. While the idea made sense, I was going to need to solicit the help of K-2 teachers with whom I was not really comfortable working with. I needed to be sure I involved them in the ideas about the parent involvement project because they know the students at that age far better than I do and because I needed them to be invested in the project if the district was really going to publicly change their posture with regard to parent involvement.

As the project progressed, I started to sense an affirmation of my belief that school administration and staff need to demonstrate their commitment to parent involvement. Again, not simply because it looks good on your mission statement, but because I believe it can truly have a positive impact on children and their learning. It also allowed me to be part of a team of teachers that enjoys working together and sharing ideas. I always believed that an administrator can be part of an effective instructional team, but I think it requires a type of leadership that is honest, non judgmental and hard working. I reflected on my need to model how I expect people to treat each other. If I am not able to work collaboratively and respectfully with teachers, how can I expect them to treat each other, children or parents that way? My leadership of this project allowed a very public endorsement of the need for parent involvement in our district.

As I continued to reflect on my own leadership, I was actually amazed at how effective I was being as a leader. Or at least that is what I thought! It is not to say that I saw myself as anything beyond the ordinary, but rather that when I treated people with respect and showed genuine care and concern for them, they seemed to respond in a way that told me they felt like they were part of a team. I have worked hard in the district to create an environment that supports and respects all people: teachers, support staff,

children, parents, and community. The time that I spent working with the teachers who participated in the project was time that I valued very much.

A unique element of the project had me reflect on the nature of the rural school and community. When working to create an effective parent involvement program, it was important to recognize some community factors that were at play. A number of the parents who were targeted by the teachers to become more involved, had limited resources or means of transportation. There were also a number of families struggling to make ends meet by working more than one job. With their additional time commitments, I needed to reflect on how we could bring services to parents who may not have access to us. By working with the teachers and encouraging them to reach out to the parents they were not hearing from, a number of the teachers were able to open up communication to the home.

It was so important for me, as a leader, to prevent the teachers (or myself) to give up on parents simply because we think they “may not be interested” or that they couldn’t help their child. Indeed, the unique nature of the community, provided an opportunity to help some parents to understand ways they can support their children learning at home. By working and talking with these parents, they may see the importance of a stronger connection to school and see possibilities for their children that they may not have seen otherwise.

My leadership in the project confirmed my commitment to be an ethical leader. I have always embraced a belief that a leader can only be effective if they are authentic and genuine in their passion for working with others. In a school setting, this passion must convert to a staunch belief in children and their abilities, a sense of excitement for

learning everyday, and a desire to fully engage all members of the community. As Starratt (2004) highlights in his book *Ethical Leadership*, “The work of educational leadership should be work that is simultaneously intellectual and moral; an activity characterized by a blend of human, professional and civic concerns; a work of cultivating an environment for learning that is humanly fulfilling and socially responsible” (Starratt, 2004, p.3). This project allowed me to be part of an experience that positively linked the work done with children during the school day to their parents at home. I am forever grateful to the teachers and families for allowing me to be part of their lives.

### *Conclusion*

The initiation and implementation of a K-2 parent involvement program in a rural context served to highlight the need for effective parent involvement. This involvement did not mean one specific thing, but rather took many forms, depending on the teacher and the parent. Outreach proved to be critical as a way to engage parents who may not have initially appeared to be involved. A welcoming and supportive school environment was also seen as a way to encourage parent involvement.

With the growing focus on accountability and student performance as assessed by standardized testing, there is a need to engage parents and families as they work with their children at home. This study served as a way to validate the belief that parent involvement is important and is something that can be encouraged and nurtured if the school offers a meaningful and respectful interaction between the classroom and the home.

APPENDIX A

**Staff Survey on Parent Involvement  
September 2007**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your help. Please answer the following questions independently. Please be as honest as possible. Thank you!

1. Every school needs to have parental involvement in the education of their children:  

SA   A   SD   D

  - a. for supporting students' academic achievement:
  - b. for supporting students' pro-social development:
2. At what grades do you think parental involvement should be focused?  
Primary \_\_\_\_\_ Intermediate \_\_\_\_\_ All \_\_\_\_\_
3. What has been your best experience with parental involvement?
4. What has been your worst experience with parental involvement?
5. What types of parental involvement do you think might be most beneficial to student achievement?
  - a. careful monitoring of their child's homework \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. conversations about topics being studied at school \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. finding applications in the home, in family and in neighborhood life of topics being studied at school \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. attending school events where their children are participating \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. attending/participating in school events with their child \_\_\_\_\_
  - f. attending parent-teacher meetings \_\_\_\_\_
  - g. simply spending more time with their child, no matter the activities \_\_\_\_\_
  - h. taking the child on educational outings \_\_\_\_\_
  - i. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
6. What types of school to home communication currently exist here at the elementary school?
7. Which of these do you feel are the most beneficial to student achievement & why?
8. What types of parental involvement/school to home communication would you like to see here at the elementary school?
9. What barriers, if any, do you think exist for parents becoming involved with activities?
10. How would you suggest we try to overcome those barriers to encourage parental involvement?
11. Any further ideas, suggestions or comments would be greatly appreciated.

## APPENDIX B

### **Staff Interview Questions for Pre-Data Collection: October 2007**

1. Suppose I were a new teacher at the Elementary school. What would you tell me about parental involvement at the school?
2. What if I were a new parent to the town, and I wanted to know what the school philosophy is regarding parental involvement. What would I be told by staff? By the administration? By other parents?
3. Do you believe parents helping children with homework is part of parental involvement? Why?
4. Do you think parents believe helping with homework is helpful parent involvement? Why or why not?
5. What types of parental involvement happen now, that you think are successful?
6. Explain what you believe are the connections, if any, between parent involvement and student achievement. On what do you base your information? Experience, (personal and/or professional), readings, research, or something else?
7. What types of parental involvement activities would you like to see at the school? How do you think these would help raise student achievement?
8. Would you say that better outreach to parents would help encourage them to become more active in school related/academic activities?
9. What do you believe parents absolutely need to know in order to help their child in your grade and in your classroom?
10. Are there any other ideas you would like to share about what you think are the necessary elements of an effective parent involvement program?

*Thank you very much for participating in this interview.*



APPENDIX D

**Parent Involvement Project  
Monthly Reflection Template**

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Assignment \_\_\_\_\_

**November 2007, December 2007 & January 2008**

1. Would you say that your thoughts or beliefs about parent involvement have changed over the first month of the project?
2. Do you think that your documenting of parent involvement activities has increased your awareness of the involvement in your classroom?  
Why or why not?
3. What (if any) patterns have you noticed as you have been tracking parent involvement in your classroom?
4. Please feel free to make any additional comments. Thank you!

**Monthly Reflection Template**

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Assignment \_\_\_\_\_

**February 2008**

1. Would you say that any of your thoughts or beliefs about parent involvement have changed over the 4 months of the project? Please explain.
2. Do you think that your documenting of parent involvement activities has improved your communication with parents?  
Why or why not?
3. Of the four classification categories (*parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home*) which is the most common form of parent involvement that is happening in your classroom? Why do you think that is?
4. How would you classify the parent responses or reactions to your communications and/or outreach? Please explain.
5. Have you seen changes in student performance (work effort or achievement) that you might say is a result of parent involvement activities? Please explain.

## Monthly Reflection Template

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Assignment \_\_\_\_\_

### March 2008

1. As a result of your documentation, have you noticed any connection between parent involvement and student achievement? Please be specific.
2. Do you believe that professional development would help teachers maximize the opportunity for parent involvement? If so, what types of PD? Please indicate reasons for your answer.
3. As we look towards creating a more formal parent involvement program, what do you suggest we include as part of the initiative?
4. Would you say that you have professionally benefited from being part of this project? If so, in what ways; if not, why do you think that is?

## Final Monthly Reflection Template

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Assignment \_\_\_\_\_

### June 2008

1. Why do you think parents get involved in their child's education and do you believe that school and teacher actions impact this? Please explain.
2. Do you believe that parent involvement has an effect on student achievement? If so, how ?
3. If the Fletcher School was to actively take 2-3 actions next year, to help promote and support parent involvement, what would your suggestions be?
4. What has been the most beneficial byproduct of your participation in the project?

## APPENDIX E

### **Post Interview Questions: June 2008**

1. Have you enjoyed the project?
2. Was it beneficial having colleagues working on the same project? Why do you think that?
3. Has the project impacted, changed, or reinforced your thinking about early grades parent involvement? How so?
4. What is one thing you have learned about yourself as a result of your participation in the project?

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