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Parent Perspectives of Family Involvement in Children's Education: Doing Whatever They Think It Takes to Help Children Grow and Succeed

Regina Marie Curran
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Regina Marie Curran entitled "Parent Perspectives of Family Involvement in Children's Education: Doing Whatever They Think It Takes to Help Children Grow and Succeed." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Education.

Mary F. Ziegler, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Ralph G. Brockett, Priscilla W. Blanton, Connie L. White

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Major Professor

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and recommend its acceptance:

Ralph G. Brockett

Priscilla W. Blanton

Connie L. White

Accepted for the Council:

Linda Painter
Interim Dean of Graduate Studies

(Original Signatures are on file with official student records.)

Parent Perspectives of Family Involvement in Children's Education:
Doing Whatever They Think It Takes
to Help Children Grow and Succeed

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Regina Marie Curran

December 2006

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The pursuit of a doctoral degree had not been my goal – I was thankful to complete a bachelor's degree in Family Studies in December 2000, a little over 33 years after taking my first college class. However, I enjoyed the academic atmosphere and the ideas I gleaned from the experienced and supportive instructors at the University of Tennessee, especially Dr. Priscilla Blanton, who showed me how families are all so different, and that not everyone is so fortunate as to be born or marry into the kinds of families with which I have been blessed. Dr. Blanton, you are the professor I aspire to be when I grow up – your understanding of the multitude of influences on the family process is what I want to pass to others.

Then I took some classes in Educational Psychology, specifically in the area of Adult Education. Dr. Ralph Brockett was my first instructor in this field of study, and he helped me to see that working with adults is a process that combines teaching and learning, and that I will learn as much from the students I teach as they will learn from me. One class with Dr. Brockett had me thinking about continuing my education for a while after I had my Bachelor's diploma in hand. Dr. Brockett, your encouragement and thoughtfulness inspired me to continue on the academic path.

Also in the Adult Education program, I met Dr. Mary Ziegler, who was not only an excellent teacher, but who helped point me toward the Center for Literacy Studies. Through Mary's mentoring and encouragement, I finished the work

toward a Master's degree and continued taking classes because I enjoyed the learning and the academic experience. Even then, I seriously questioned whether I would continue on to complete a doctoral program. However, through Mary's cheerleading and her ability to put things into perspective, I kept on going. Without your encouragement and assistance through this process, Mary, I would not be writing this paper today. Thank you for working so hard with me and being my mentor.

Through my assistantship at the Center for Literacy Studies, I met Dr. Connie White, who became both my boss and a member of my doctoral committee. Connie, your encouragement and constant building up of my abilities pushed me to want to do better - just to meet your expectations. Thank you for being the best boss I have ever had, and for becoming my friend.

I also want to acknowledge a special group of fellow students who were in my doctoral program; Steve Frye, Cathy Pierce, and Patricia Duffley-Renow. While experiencing doctoral classes together, we formed a cohort research group led by Dr. Mary Ziegler, and we learned so much from each other. Thanks to all of you, and I will be cheering for you as you reach this point in your programs in the very near future.

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DEDICATION

My passion for the contributions of family to children's success and growth originates from the feelings I have for my own family. Therefore, this work is dedicated to my family...

To my mother, Lillian Matthias, who has always been there to support, provide guidance, cheer me on, and show me the way to grow, succeed, and do my best in life. You've been my example, Mom.

To my sister, Ann, and brother, Dave, who shared Mom with me and who helped me learn what family is. I wouldn't have chosen any others as my brother and sister even if I had been given a choice.

To my daughters, Christine and Carolyn, and to my sons, Bill and Jim, who provided me with experience in learning what families do to help their children to grow and to succeed. I am very proud of each of you. I love you all and consider you my greatest accomplishments and contributions to society.

And finally, to my husband, Bill, who is my rock, my friend, my comfort, my love, and my support. Thank you for the years we've had together.

"A happy family is but an earlier heaven." George Bernard Shaw

Abstract

Research shows that when families are involved in their children's education, children's academic achievement increases. However, parents' views of their roles in their children's education do not always mesh with what school administrators define as family involvement. The purpose of this study was to explore parents' perspectives on involvement in their children's education. The research question that guided this study was, "What do parents perceive family involvement in children's education to be?" The tradition of inquiry used in this study was the grounded theory method that focuses on the emergence of a theory rather than the testing of one. Fifteen parents were interviewed about their ideas of family involvement. The general theme that emerged from the data was that parents do whatever they need to do to help their children grow and succeed. Two major categories became apparent; what parents do and how they learn to do it. What parents do is communicate, give children reasons to learn, support learning, and ensure children's growth and success. They learn to do these things through example, experience, society, and school personnel. Implications for policy and practice include a) revising teacher preparation programs to include curriculum that shows teachers how to work with families, and b) helping teachers see parents as adult learners who want to learn to help their children, but who learn in different ways and for different reasons than their children learn. In addition, this study expands the theory of family involvement by illustrating what parents perceive as important in helping their children grow and succeed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Researchers tell us that when families are involved in their children's education, children's academic achievement increases. Many studies have found that students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, were more likely to earn higher grades and test scores; pass their classes and be promoted; attend school regularly; have better social skills and behavior; and graduate and go on to postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Epstein, 1990; Clark, 1990; Comer & Haynes, 1992; Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom (1993). Although much research shows the positive effects of family involvement, not all parents choose to become involved, and many parents are not involved in ways that school personnel expect them to be involved. This study will attempt to discover factors that affect parents' perceptions of what involvement is and the decisions they make about their own involvement.

Background

The recent emphasis on accountability in education brought about by decreasing school test scores and *No Child Left Behind* policies (H.R. 1, 2001) has produced a search for tactics that will help school systems increase academic success for their students. One activity frequently seen as highly effective in addressing this issue is to increase parental involvement in children's educational efforts. While researchers have conducted various studies of the effect of family involvement, there is seldom agreement on exactly what

constitutes family involvement. For example, some school personnel only consider the number of people who attend open houses and conferences as evidence of family involvement, seeing family involvement as consisting of the parent's physical presence in the school. Others see parent involvement in any educational activity the parent undertakes with the child, wherever the activity is conducted. In this view, parent involvement can take place in the home as well as in school, and can include such activities as reading with children and helping with homework.

Among the most widely-known experts in family and school partnerships is Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University, the creator of a framework for family involvement that includes six types of involvement. Epstein et al's framework (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, & Simon, 1997) fits well with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner (1986) theorizes that children are influenced by all of the people in the systems in which they function. Epstein's partnership between home, schools and community is an illustration of how the child's contexts combine to influence his or her learning and experiences. Epstein's family involvement model contains two home-based influences, two school-based influences, and two school/community influences. The home-based areas include parents meeting the child's basic needs, such as food, shelter and safety, and doing concrete things to establish a positive learning environment in the home. Home-based activities include such actions as providing learning materials, setting aside space for learning, and participating in learning activities with their child. The school-based activities include

communication with school personnel and active participation in classroom and/or school activities. The school/community influences include parents' participation in school governance and in community political issues that affect education.

Parallel to questions about what constitutes family involvement are questions about which forms of parent involvement have the greatest effects on student achievement. In the 1990's, concern was building over the failure of American students to continue the academic progress exhibited in past years. As a result, the pendulum began swinging to parents as being the foundation on which learning would build, and researchers began finding new ways to engage parents to supplement what was being learned in the classroom. With the emphasis in recent years on accountability, testing, and reporting of results in school systems, politicians and school board members are demanding changes from what is perceived as not effective to methods that might have better results. Much research has been done in recent years on the effect of parent involvement in children's academic success, and most studies report positive results (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Epstein, 1990; Clark, 1990; Comer & Haynes, 1992; Kellaghan et al, 1993). Almost across the board, researchers have found that when parents are involved in their children's education, students:

- a. Have higher grade point averages and higher scores on standardized tests
- b. Are enrolled in more academically challenging courses
- c. Pass more classes and earn more credits

- d. Have better attendance
- e. Have improved behavior at home and at school and better social skills
- f. Are more likely to graduate from high school and attend post-secondary programs

However, not all parents have equivalent access to resources to bring to their involvement in children's education. Parents vary in the amount of time, money, energy, and education/knowledge they possess. In his study, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966) Coleman et al found that variations among family backgrounds made more difference in children's achievement than variations between schools. Coleman explained, "Schools, of whatever quality, are more effective for children from strong family backgrounds than for children from weak ones. The resources devoted by the family to the child's education interact with the resources provided by the school – and there is greater variation in the former resources than the latter" (Coleman, 1987). Coleman suggested that schools provide inputs into the socialization process of students that can be characterized as opportunities, demands, and rewards. A second set of inputs come from the child's "closer, more intimate and more persisting environment . . . and the environment that most affects them is, for nearly all children, the social environment of the household" (p.35). These inputs are attitudes, effort, and conception of self. Thus, if the family does not help the child develop good attitudes about school and self, the schools will not be as effective in doing their part. Just as a recipe will likely fail if the proper ingredients are not combined

correctly, the outputs of education cannot be realized if there is not a positive blend of the qualities the child brings from home with the qualities the school can provide.

Supporting what the family brings to academic achievement, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1974) said, “to use a chemical analogy, parent intervention functions as a kind of *fixative*, which stabilizes effects produced by other processes.” In addition, Kellaghan et al (1993 p. 8) concluded, “It seems most unlikely that a significant improvement in the quality of education for all students can be achieved without active support from other quarters ... particularly families” (p. 8). Obviously, these researchers find families important to children’s achievement.

However, most of the research about family involvement consists of quantitative studies that attempt to link academic success to family involvement. The research on parent involvement is limited by the fact that there is a lack of conceptual clarity about what family involvement is or how to measure it. It is very difficult to link academic achievement to parent involvement because there are so many other factors that can affect achievement, and family involvement does not take place in a vacuum or in isolation.

Problem

Although research shows the positive effects of family involvement, not all parents choose to become involved. In addition, there is not a single, agreed-upon definition of what family involvement is. While a number of studies have addressed parent involvement, most of the studies have relied on teacher

assessments of what constitutes family involvement, rather than on parents' perspectives. Although a small number of studies have combined teacher and parent perspectives, few studies have concentrated solely on parents by asking them to describe their perceptions about parent involvement. This gap in the literature may lead to an imbalanced and narrow understanding of the kinds of activities that constitute family involvement, and how these activities correspond with what school personnel think of as family involvement as described in the literature.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore parents' perspectives on involvement in their children's education. This topic includes their perceptions about what constitutes involvement, about how they learned to be involved and about their reasons for involvement. The research question that guided the study was *What do parents perceive family involvement to constitute, how did they learn to be involved, and what are their reasons for involvement?*

Contributions

Because this study focused on parental viewpoints, it adds a seldom-tapped perspective to the existing parent involvement knowledge base, and may focus future research and raise important new research questions. In addition, findings may increase the theoretical understanding of family involvement that is grounded in the parents' experiences and perceptions. Findings from this study may help school administrators understand factors that encourage or hinder family involvement in education and give them ideas for creating programs that

parents would see as helpful and worth their limited time and energy. Findings may also assist administrators and professors of higher education to use parents' perspectives in teacher preparation programs.

Another way in which this study may help schools to have a positive effect on family involvement is by pointing out the value of programs that will help parents understand their importance to their children's academic achievement and help parents learn strategies that can be used at home. Those strategies might include such topics as the effects of various parenting styles, tips about reading, writing, and math, homework tips, book suggestions, college planning nights, make and take it activities, and many other topics. Epstein & Becker (1982) found that of all types of involvement, supervision of learning activities at home may be the most educationally significant. In contrast to PTA meetings and classroom volunteering that include a small number of parents, home activities can involve any number of families. Teachers and schools who find ways to involve parents in the home will be able to involve a greater number of parents, and consequently, affect a greater number of children.

In addition to possible benefits to schools, participants may also have benefited from the study through the satisfaction of being able to talk about their experiences and the pleasure of being listened to, and by having the opportunity to better understand their actions. In addition, findings from this study may help school administrators understand factors that encourage or hinder family involvement in education and give them ideas for creating programs that will assist parents to help their children in school. Findings may also assist

administrators and professors of higher education to use parents' perspectives when working with both teachers and parents.

Limitations

While there are many quantitative studies of achievement and activities associated with family involvement, there are not as many qualitative studies that describe family involvement. Admittedly, quantitative research provides valuable information about what happens when families play a partnership role on children's academic efforts. However, there are many sub-categories of family involvement that cannot be measured fully by survey assessments, and the scarcity of qualitative studies limits our understanding of the beliefs parents have and the actions they take to support their children. Descriptions, case studies, interviews and using the stories and words of families and teachers would paint a much more vibrant and effective picture of parent perspectives of family involvement and lead to the development of theory grounded in parents' experiences. In this researcher's opinion, quantitative methods alone cannot tease out the factors that measure student achievement to provide a definitive answer about the effect of family involvement on children's learning. However, because qualitative research does not include quantitative measurement, policy makers might not value qualitative research in the pursuit of "proving what works" in today's "scientifically research-based" climate.

A further limitation to this qualitative study is the inability to generalize across populations. Qualitative research seeks to explore the real experiences of a phenomenon for a small number of participants, not to seek the similarities

within a large number of people. Researchers cannot draw quantitative conclusions from qualitative data; therefore, the experiences of one parent cannot be seen as generalizable to others. The qualitative goal of isolating and defining categories during a research project differs from the quantitative goal; categories are the object of the research rather than the means. In fact, “the purpose of the qualitative interview is not to discover how many, and what kinds of, people share a certain characteristic...it is more intensive than extensive in its objective” (McCracken, 1988). Therefore, this study will not explore how many parents experience the same perceptions, but will dig more deeply into the experiences of specific parents.

A final limitation to this study is the low likelihood of reaching parents who rarely or never participate in their children’s education. Because these parents seldom respond to invitations to participate in school activities, it is unlikely they will volunteer for this research project. This issue limits collection of data from those who might provide an important perspective.

Organization

This dissertation contains five chapters. The first chapter introduces the topic and background of family involvement. Chapter two presents a review of the literature about family involvement, and the third chapter explains the research method and the rationale for using the method. Findings are presented in Chapter IV, and Chapter V contains a discussion of the findings and the implications for the future. Following the numbered chapters, I have included an appendix of forms used in data collection.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used in the literature review and have different meanings for people. The definitions I am using for this study follow:

Parent or Family Member: An adult or family member who assumes some responsibility for the well being of a child, including older siblings and relatives.

Parental or Family Involvement: Activities in which parents or other family members participate to support children's learning.

Self Efficacy: People's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives.

Locus of Control: A belief about whether the outcomes of our actions are contingent on what we do (internal control orientation) or on events outside our personal control (external control orientation)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): The recent federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school. NCLB is built on four principles: accountability for results, more choices for parents, greater local control and flexibility, and an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research.

Summary

When parents are involved, no matter their income or background, research shows that their children earn higher grades and test scores, have better school attendance, and graduate in higher numbers than students whose parents are not involved (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Since parents are important to children's success, schools must find ways to foster their involvement. This study will help to illuminate the perceptions parents have about

family involvement, helping school personnel and parents alike understand how they can encourage a true partnership between teachers and parents.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to capture the parents' perspectives of family involvement, I have used grounded theory methodology. The purpose of this section is to argue for the inclusion of a literature review prior to conducting the study because there are varying views about the place of the literature review in a grounded theory study. Most researchers conduct a literature review prior to beginning a study so that they know what has been found previously about the subject and what still needs more study. However, because reading the literature may narrow down the topic of research, grounded theory advocates often suggest delaying the review of the literature until after the study has been conducted. These researchers believe the literature in a grounded theory study is more relevant at the end of the study than at the beginning. Their reason for the later placement is that the literature is not central to the story of the participants, but merely an added collection of data that may support the new theory. Therefore, the literature is not given any more importance than the rest of the data that has been collected for the study. The study can be located within the literature to see where it fits and how it confirms or denies what has been previously studied, but only after the data collection has provided its own theories as a separate study. Therefore, once I have collected and analyzed my data, I will go back to the literature to investigate whether the results of my study fit within previous studies or add to them.

Grounded theory is also used when there is already some knowledge about the research phenomenon, but a new point of view is sought (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this case, bracketing (acknowledging and setting aside judgments) is used to set aside presuppositions about the data that will be collected. However, some researchers find that ideas and assumptions a researcher has about the situation being discussed *should* be used in order to understand the processes being discussed (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992; Sandelowski, 1998). Strauss & Corbin (1990) wrote, "We know that we never can be completely free of our biases, for so many are unconscious and part of our cultural inheritances. We find it more helpful to acknowledge that these influence our thinking and then look for ways in which to break through or move beyond them". (p. 99) Therefore, researchers using grounded theory must become aware of prior knowledge and assumptions about the situation being observed, and use that awareness to be sensitive to what is being discovered and not allow biases to color their view of the data or influence the direction of the data collection.

McCracken (1988) addressed literature reviews as follows:

the benefits of the "preconceptions" that spring from the literature review are, perhaps, much greater than their costs...Literature reviews, after all, are not simple exercises in idea collection. They are, in fact, a kind of qualitative analysis. They search out the conscious and unconscious assumptions of scholarly enterprises. They determine how these assumptions force the definition of problems and findings. The good literature review is a critical

process that makes the investigator the master, not the captive, of previous scholarship (p. 31).

After careful consideration of both trains of thought, I chose to conduct a literature review of family involvement so that I would be informed by what previous researchers have found and would have some ideas about the results of previous research. In addition, the literature review provided insight into what is missing – the parents' perspective. Although I had some knowledge of the activities and observations of other researchers, I strove to allow the experiences of my participants to rise to the surface, rather than my own views or those of other researchers.

Family Involvement

A major theorist who pointed out the overlapping influences on children was Urie Bronfenbrenner who hypothesized that people are influenced by what happens in all areas of life. Therefore, what happens at home (family involvement) will influence what happens at school. Figure 1 illustrates Bronfenbrenner's theory about how the various systems to which a child comes into contact all work together to shape and influence the child, showing that a child's academic success is affected not only by teachers, but by other influences as well.

Family involvement cannot be reduced to one encompassing definition that is understood by and agreed on by all. As Epstein speculates, there are various kinds and levels of involvement, ranging from activities that take place in the home or school that support learning to working with state legislators to

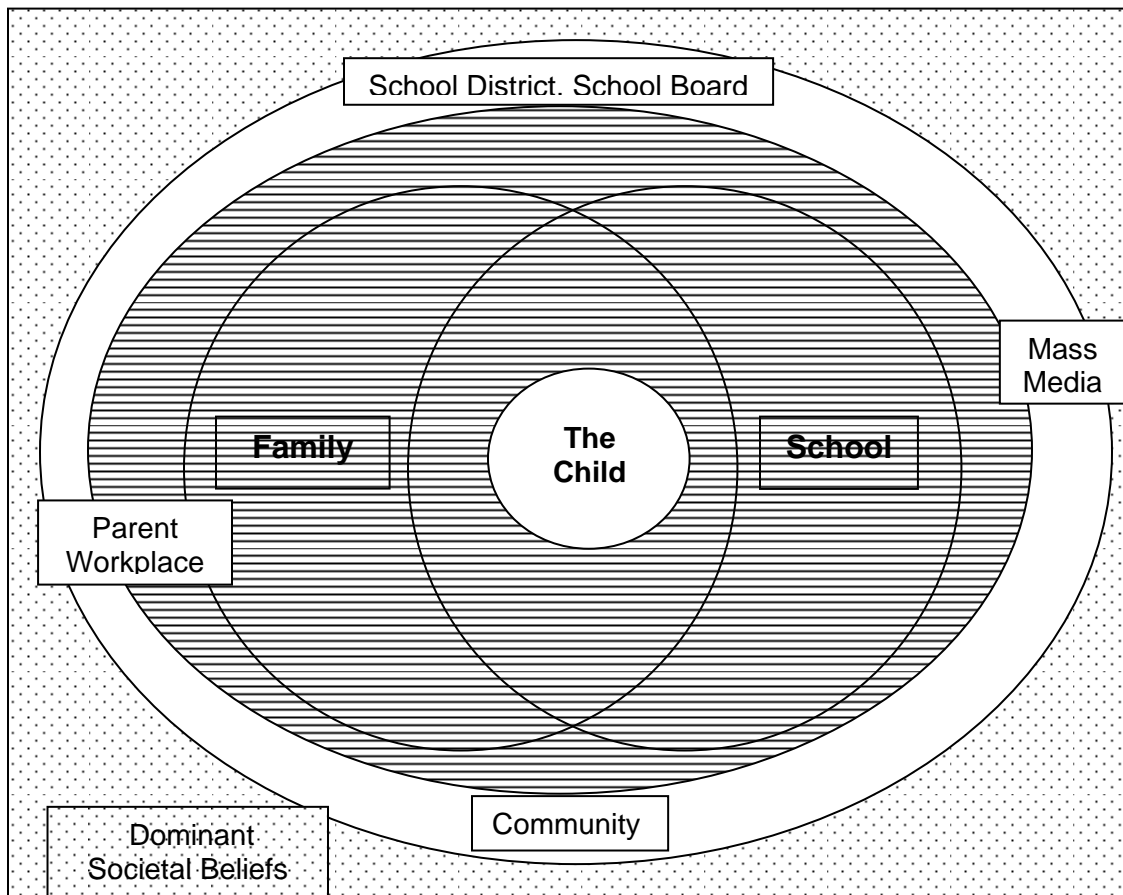


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

change education laws. While families are involved at various levels, research shows that parents often do not get involved because they do not feel they have enough time, do not have transportation to school, or do not have child care for smaller children (NEA, 2005). However, involvement does not have to take a great quantity of time or frequent physical presence at school. Involvement can take the form of talking to children, discussing current events with them, and comparing what they are learning with what is happening in their lives. It can be encouraging children and asking how their day went, and letting them know what is expected of them, that the effort they are putting into school is valued, and that their effort is important. Attending parent-teacher conferences is a form of involvement, but so is attending a school play or sports event and reading a report a child did for school and making comments about it (Epstein et al, 1997).

Vaden-Kiernan et al (2005) conducted a series of telephone interviews sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education using survey data from the 2003 collection (NCES:2003). The sample was selected using a random digit dial method, and the data were collected using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology. The sample was nationally representative of all children in kindergarten through grade 12 enrolled in regular school or home-schooled in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Data collection included information about demographic characteristics, home-schooling, school choice, types and frequency of family involvement in children's schools, school information practices to involve and support families, learning activities with children outside of school, and the involvement of non-residential parents.

Screener interviews were completed with 32,049 households, collecting information on household composition and interview eligibility (child K-12). The parent interview was completed by 12,426 parents, a response rate of 83 percent of those eligible.

Results from the phone interviews supported the following conclusions regarding parents:

- a. For children kindergarten through 5th grade, the percentage of children whose parents reported having read to them or done home activities with them in the past week increased as parents' educational level increased.
- b. The higher a parent's education, the more likely that he or she will volunteer at school, especially to attend general school meetings.
- c. 95% of parents say they frequently help children with homework, and 90% say they provide children with a place set aside for homework.

School results included:

- a. The percentage of students in K-12 whose parents reported that they "strongly agreed" that the student's school makes it easy for them to be involved was higher for students in households above the poverty level. (45%) than for students in households at or below the poverty level (35%)
- b. As the child's grade level increased, relatively fewer parents reported that schools sent home notes or emails.

This research indicates that there are differences in attitudes about family involvement in school, and those attitudes are affected by parents' education and income levels. However, the research does not claim causality

between increased education and family involvement. There are many reasons why a parent may not become involved in education, including culture, feelings of self-worth, past experiences in schools, and expectations. Similarly, these same reasons can affect teachers' attitudes toward family involvement and whether they welcome parents or discourage their involvement.

A three-year study conducted by Izzo, Weissberg, Kaspro, and Fendrich (1999) investigated the effect of parental involvement in 341 kindergarten through third grade classrooms in a small, ethnically diverse, southern New England city. Teachers in Year 1 rated the social and academic behavior and parental involvement of the initial 2300 students who had been randomly selected. Attempts to obtain follow-up ratings and data in Year 2 and Year 3 resulted in a 3-year data set for 1205 participants. Teacher-Child rating scales asked teachers to rate each student's problems and competencies in numerous areas of social and academic functioning at school. Teacher-Parent rating scales asked teachers to rate the quantity and quality of each parent's involvement in their children's education in four areas: the number of contacts they had with each child's parents, two questions that were averaged into a variable reflecting the quality of their interactions with each child's parents, two questions that were averaged into a variable reflecting teachers' perceptions about whether parents participated at school, and two questions that were averaged into a variable reflecting teacher's perceptions about whether parents engaged in activities at home to enhance their child's social and academic development. Schools also provided the number of absences for each child.

Teachers reported numerous contacts with parents and were relatively satisfied with the quantity and quality of their interactions. The study concluded, *participation in educational activities at home significantly predicted the widest range of performance variables, and predicted academic achievement significantly more strongly than any other parent involvement variable. . . supporting the notion that schools can improve children's performance by increasing parents' ability to support learning at home* (Izzo et al, 1999).

In fact, many studies show that what the parent does at home is even more important than what the parent does at school. Programs that target parents' communication with students and parents' support of students' educational and career development are more effective than programs that urge parents to volunteer at school (Trusty & Harris, 1999; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Coleman, 1966).

One particularly interesting study of family involvement in children's education conducted by Dinah Volk (1994) addressed language patterns that Puerto Rican mothers employed in their interactions with the children in their home. Volk was questioning the validity of findings of past studies that showed poor Hispanic parents as less knowledgeable about their children's educational programs and less involved than parents of Black and Caucasian children in the same programs. Volk used a case study approach to investigate how three parents interacted with their children in home activities. Volk used a variety of methods for data collection: parent interviews, participant observation, and audio

taping of mother/child interactions. Because she reported on what was actually witnessed and heard, and the information was interpreted by a person who spoke both Spanish and English, the trustworthiness of the reported data is strong. In addition, the data were not self-reported or reported by a person likely to hold a bias against the observed party.

Volk found that the picture that emerged of mother-child interaction contradicted what is often said about Hispanic parents (that they are apathetic, uncooperative, and hard to reach). Volk found that much of the learning that takes place in children is due to informal interactions in the home; that Hispanic parents would show both similarities and differences from one another in their home interactions with their children; and that generalities about parents would not prove valid. As in much qualitative research, the number of participants studied was small, and generalizations cannot be made about any group of people by what is written about three participants. However, finding out what happens to three people suggests possible contradictions to the research.

Just as recent research has looked into the relationship between family involvement and its effect on children's achievement, researchers have also studied how parents feel about family involvement and the extent to which they are involved in their child's education. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) conducted a review of studies that addressed the dynamics of parents' decisions to become involved in their children's elementary and secondary education and why their involvement often created positive outcomes for their children. They saw parents' decisions as being aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological

systems theory, which argues that human development must be considered within the social systems that surround such development and Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism, which focuses on the meanings of interactions and events to people and the symbols they use to convey that meaning. Similarly, Clark (1990) found that the various contexts of home, school and community are permeated by norms, standards, rules and expectations. In other words, the social environmental systems (in this case, family, school and community) affect developmental processes and outcomes. The review of the literature on family involvement found several major influences on parents' decisions to become involved in their children's education. The roles they expect to play in life are often dictated by society's expectations and how we feel about our ability and opportunity to fill those roles. These expectations, abilities, and opportunities influence parents in their choices about participation in children's education, and include: (a) roles; (b) social class, (c) self-efficacy, (d) locus of control, and (e) feelings of welcome at school.

Effect of Social Class

The first influence on parents' decisions to become involved in their children's education is the culture of the community in which they live – whether involvement is an expected role for parents in a particular family, school, or social community. Parents frequently learn their roles from the groups of which they are members, such as friends, workplace, and community. What does the group communicate about the expected roles for parent involvement in school? Over time, the values and expectations of the groups to which a person belongs will

influence his or her actions; those surrounded by people who value education and parental involvement will be more likely to become actively involved than those who are surrounded by people who discount those activities. In other words, does the parent believe that parents are supposed to help their children in school?

Social class has an effect on the beliefs of parents about their roles in academic involvement with their children. Lareau (1987) found that working class parents have a “separated” view of home and school – that their roles involve such tasks as getting children off to school on time and ensuring they have basic good manners. They often accept without question the school’s decisions about their children in areas such as placement and retention because they believe those areas are the responsibilities of the schools. In contrast, middle-class parents are seen as having an “interconnected” view of home and school, seeing themselves as having an integral and equal role with the school in educating children. They see their roles as active monitors who are responsible for intervening in school decisions as necessary. Because of their beliefs about their roles, middle-class parents are often more involved in school than their working class neighbors.

Another effect of social class differences on family-school relationships is that middle class culture provides parents and children with opportunities for social ties formed through after-school activities that require transportation. While parents wait for their children at soccer practice, swimming lessons, and gymnastics, the parents socialize and talk about school, teachers, or other

relevant topics, resulting in a level of comfort with each other when associating at school functions. In contrast, the after-school hours of working class children are filled with more home-oriented activities such as watching television, riding bikes and playing with neighborhood children. Parents of these children are often working or are at home taking care of other children, precluding the attainment of comfort in getting to know other parents and having opportunities to talk about school, children, and teachers. The level of comfort parents feel with each other in a school environment influences school involvement because most people are more willing to go where they feel they belong and are comfortable.

Working class parents often experience more discomfort during school visits than middle class parents. Lareau (1987) conducted a study of two elementary schools, one in a working class community where most of the parents were high school graduates or drop-outs, employed in skilled or semiskilled occupations, paid an hourly wage, and periodically unemployed. The other school was in a professional middle class community where a majority of the parents were college graduates and professionals with strong careers less vulnerable to economic fluctuations. Lareau studied the parents at the schools' Open Houses, and found a marked difference in the interactions between parents and teachers at each school. At the working class school, "interactions were stiff and awkward and parents showed signs of discomfort: nervous shifting, blushing, stuttering, sweating, and generally looking ill at ease" (p. 78). Many of the parents wandered quietly around the room looking at their child's work but did not speak with the teacher; those who did speak with the teacher were formal

and serious. In contrast, at the middle class school almost all of the parents talked to the teacher or the teacher's aide, and the conversations were "long and punctuated by jokes and questions." Because many of the parents knew each other, there was a "quite a bit of interaction between families"; "the room had the noisy, crowded, and animated atmosphere of a cocktail party" (p. 78).

In their book, "*Schools That Work*", Allington & Cunningham (2002) wrote about the contrast in views about schoolwork and homework between working class parents and middle class parents. He saw a parallel to the parents' work lives. Blue collar workers did not bring work home and believed their children should finish school work in school. In middle class homes, parents often work at white-collar jobs where it is expected that they bring work home to do in the evenings and on weekends, and they viewed homework as normal.

In addition to differing beliefs about roles, many parents of lower socioeconomic status experience the cumulative effects of low education, low income, and higher levels of general stress caused by environmental factors, influencing their general feeling of apathy or helplessness with education. Parents' time is limited by the responsibilities of children, spouse and/or other family members, cooking and other chores, and a need for some time of their own. Some parents wonder why they are being asked to spend time with each child at home on academic skills that should be learned in the classroom. Some parents' general life experiences may have taught them that "*parents like me don't get active – they send their children to school and hope for the best*" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997 p.16). How one's parents treated school

involvement impacts how involved an individual becomes in his or her own children's school education. "*The way we see ourselves, others, and the world is shaped in the setting of our family of origin. The views we develop there stay with us throughout life*" (Richardson, 1995, p.1). If our parents were involved parents, then we are more likely to define our own roles in a similar way. If our parents had a "hands-off" approach to school, leaving education solely to school staff, then we may lean toward being less active in our children's education.

Self-efficacy

A third influence on whether parents choose to become involved in their children's education is parents' feelings of self-efficacy about their ability to help their children succeed in school. Self-efficacy is the belief that one has the ability to exercise a level of control over events that affect one's life (Bandura, 1989a). A person may have higher self-efficacy in one area but lower self-efficacy in other areas. For example, people may believe that they have the ability to help their children by feeding and clothing them, but feel that they are not capable of helping them academically. Bandura (1977) found that individuals low in self-efficacy for a given area of activity tend to believe they cannot cope with difficulties in that area, and they tend to avoid tasks that they believe will exceed their abilities. Applying self-efficacy theory to children's education suggests that "*parents will guide their actions (i.e. make their involvement choices) by thinking through, in advance of their behavior, what outcomes are likely to follow the actions they might take . . . and will plan any actions based on these anticipations*" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, 18). In other words, do parents

believe they can create a positive influence on their children's ability to do well in school? Their own self-answers to this question will influence their willingness to become involved in children's education.

There are parents who lack the ability to read or are embarrassed about their lack of schooling; these parents may not feel that they have much to offer their children in the academic area and might be unwilling to admit their inability to their children and their teachers. In addition, many parents have had negative experiences of their own while they were students, and these memories can linger throughout adulthood (Petersen & Warnby, 1992). Parents who had negative experiences in their own school careers or who have limited knowledge of academic areas most frequently have low levels of self-efficacy about helping their children in school. Mothers and fathers who dropped out of school before obtaining high school diplomas are not likely to feel that they have the knowledge to be able to help their children. These parents may express doubts about their educational abilities and wonder if they are able to help their children with their schoolwork. As one mother stated, *"I know that when she gets into the higher grades, I won't be able to help her, math especially, unless I take a refresher course. . . So I feel that it is the teacher's job to help her as much as possible to understand it, because I know that I won't be able to"* (Lareau, 1987). Parents sometimes look to teachers as mentors who will show them what to do to help their children.

Similarly, those who have limited command of the English language also lack confidence that they can help their children in school. In addition, those who

have little knowledge of the inner working of schools, whether due to poor experiences of their own or not having attended American schools, are less likely to feel that they have much to offer by being involved in the education of their children. Therefore, parent involvement is limited in those who experience low levels of self-efficacy about academic attainment.

On the other hand, people who have high levels of self-efficacy tend to set higher goals and to put forth more effort in response to difficulty. Because they believe they are capable of exercising control over the challenges they might face, they are more likely to respond to increased difficulties with more effort, rather than to give up. Therefore, a high level of self-efficacy frequently results in parental involvement in children's education because of the belief that failure is due to insufficient effort rather than lack of ability. In addition, middle class parents are less likely to doubt their ability to help, "*I don't think of teachers as more educated than me or in a higher position than me. We are equals. They are not working for me, but they also aren't doing something I couldn't do. It is more a question of a division of labor*" (Lareau, 1987). Consequently, belief in self influences a parent's decision to become involved in children's education.

Locus of Control

Bemak and Cornely (2002) hypothesized that locus of control has an effect on whether parents become involved with school. Locus of control can be internal, meaning that we think we have control over our lives through our actions, or external, meaning that we believe other people and forces have a major influence over our lives. Research has found that some ethnic minorities,

impoverished individuals, and women and girls tend to have higher external loci of control (Sue and Sue, 1999). In another study, Hess et al (1984) asked low-income mothers to assign weight to four areas for contributions to children's school success – parent's help and encouragement, teacher's help, child ability, and luck. They found that the majority of parents indicated their belief that luck had more to do with academic success than a parent's encouragement and support. People who feel that they have less control over what happens in life are not as likely to feel that they can influence their children's academic success. In contrast, more highly-educated parents and school personnel tend to have a high internal locus of control that influences their belief that they are responsible for their actions and that their actions influence results. However, locus of control is not an "either/or" choice; we can feel we have control over one situation while having no control in another. Even when parents feel some control over their ability to help children, they may not choose to become involved if they don't feel their participation is welcome.

Feeling Welcome

This leads to the final area cited in this research. There are differences among schools and teachers as to how open they are to parents' involvement. The differences lead to many questions; such as,

- a. Do parents feel invited to participate, and do they see opportunities for involvement?
- b. Does the teacher believe that the parents can be helpful, or that they will just get in the way of good teaching?

- c. Does the teacher believe the parents are “smart enough” to help the child? Do school personnel welcome parents to the school and classroom, and do they find appropriate and constructive duties for the parents to take part in?
- d. Do the teachers find ways for parents to help in the home, and do they provide opportunities for parents to learn ways in which to assist their children at home?
- e. Alternately, invitations by children are needed by many parents – do their children want their help?

Epstein and Becker’s (1982) extensive research on parent involvement has consistently produced evidence that patterns of teacher attitudes and invitations are important to many parents’ decisions about participation in children’s schooling. Teachers have various attitudes about the ability and desire of parents to help their children. Some teachers make stereotypical judgments about the involvement and abilities of less educated parents, socio-economically disadvantaged parents, and single parents, and are less likely to involve parents in their children’s education. Other teachers who are leaders in frequent use of parent involvement do not prejudge less educated, poor, or single parents (Epstein & Becker, 1982). Teachers who believe that all parents are capable of encouraging and helping their children will find ways to involve the parents; teachers who think there are parents who do not possess the resources that are necessary to help their children will not make the effort to involve them. If parents feel that the teachers are talking to them in a condescending manner, they are

not likely to return for more of the same treatment, but if a teacher responds to parents as if they have something valuable to offer to the child's education, then they will feel welcome. Therefore, the attitudes of teachers can have a bearing on whether parents feel invited to participate in children's education.

In addition to teachers' attitudes, teachers' time is a barrier to involving parents, just as it is a barrier to parents' efforts to become involved. While many teachers know there are benefits to involving and communicating with parents, time often keeps them from doing so. Teachers spend most of the day in the classroom with children, and the little "free" time they have is spent planning for classroom instruction and completing school forms, grades, and paperwork. To call or write parents about their children's progress might take just ten minutes per child, but if there are 25 students, the time adds up to over four hours of calls or notes. If teachers feel that the time they spend will accomplish positive change, then they might be willing to spend the time. Therefore, parents' reactions to communications from teachers will influence the teacher's future actions. Teachers who have not had positive feedback and response from their efforts are likely to develop poor attitudes about the feasibility of involving parents.

Language and culture can also create barriers to parents' feeling of welcome at schools. In a recent seminar on family engagement (Costantino, 2005), Steve Constantino of Family Friendly Schools asked a group of teachers and administrators to think about the entrance to their schools to visualize whether there were any signs in languages other than English to welcome

parents to their children's school. Parents who do not speak or read English may not be aware of what is happening at the school, and may not know they are invited to be involved. If there are non-English speaking families at the school, efforts should be made to communicate with them in their own language, informing them about school activities and their children's progress and class work.

Some teachers are almost as uncomfortable with parent-teacher communications as parents are. The 2005 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher found that new teachers report that their biggest challenge is communicating with and involving parents, even though they know that working well with parents is key to their effectiveness in the classroom. In a study by Epstein & Becker (1982) one teacher said, "Most teachers fear parents and I, too, only use parents when I feel I have complete control." Another teacher was quoted, "My experience indicates that teachers are even more fearful than parents of our interaction." If teachers are afraid of parents and parents are afraid of teachers, how will effective parent involvement be achieved?

In addition to feeling welcomed by school personnel, parents sometimes feel that their children do not welcome their participation in school activities. Many children in early elementary schools are excited about having their parents participate in school activities and they let their parents know of their desire. However, as they grow older, they may not be as eager to have their parents around or they may not let their parents see their desire. This may be one of the reasons parental involvement changes in upper grades. Eccles and Harold

(1994) found that parental involvement practices were found in elementary schools more often than in middle, junior high, or senior high schools. A study conducted by Zill & Nord (1994) found that parental participation in schools wanes as the child's age increases. At age 8, 73% of parents are highly involved. This figure decreases to 67% at age 12; 57% at age 13; and 50% for students age 16 and older. This decrease could be a result of parents believing their children no longer need or want parental participation, that they no longer feel welcome at the schools, or a combination of both.

A recent editorial in the Knoxville News Sentinel (Booker, 2005) pithily pointed out the importance of school family partnerships:

I know that too many parents are too busy doing other things to worry about their children's progress. After all, they believe that is the function of the school. Conversely, the school says it spends too much time with discipline problems that should be regulated by the parents. . . Parents must be encouraged, cajoled, and even shamed into becoming a part of their children's school lives. It is difficult for teachers to motivate children who get no encouragement at home.

To recap, if parents feel it is a duty of the parent's role to be involved in their children's education, if they feel that they will be able to fill that role successfully, and if they feel they are welcome and wanted, they will be more likely to be involved parents in their children's education. Research suggests that children will be more successful in school if teachers and schools can find ways

to assure that parents feel welcome in school and to help parents understand the vital importance of their involvement in their children's learning.

Parents as Adult Learners

Parents are not born with the ability to parent. Just as in any other role taken on in life, parenting is a continuous learning process. There are many ways to learn a job; imitation of others, informal observation, formal education, and on-the-job training are among the most common learning methods. Parents are adult learners who are learning a job that has important implications for the children, families, communities, and society in general.

Malcolm Knowles (1980) championed some crucial ideas about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from characteristics of children. These principles guide adult learning: self-direction in learning rather than dependence on others, using experience as a resource, readiness to learn, shift in orientation from learning for the future to a need to apply learning immediately, and the development of an internal motivation to learn. Each of these areas is appropriate for parents who are learning how to help their children in school; parents are self-directed about learning information that will help their children grow and succeed, they use their own experiences to guide their learning, they are ready to learn, they want to apply the knowledge immediately, and they have an internal motivation- they want to do a good job with their children.

Illeris (2002) hypothesized that learning is made up of three distinct dimensions: a cognitive dimension, an emotional dimension, and a social dimension. Learning to be a parent falls firmly within each of these dimensions.

Parents use their minds to find out what is best for their child, what will keep them safe and what will help them to develop and grow throughout their childhood years. The emotional connection to children is profound. They use their emotions to show their love and to help their children find and return love, and they use their social connections to raise their children to feel and respect community ties.

Piaget's (1952) concept of the process of equilibrium suggests people are constantly trying to reach a balance between what they know and what is changing in the world around them. Through continued adaptation to the environment, they change either themselves or the environment. Assimilation is learning by addition, or adding to what we already know, and accommodation is the changing of what we already know by altering our impressions. Piaget asserts that each person makes different accommodations in learning because of the diversity of our experiences and knowledge. Parents are challenged to find a balance between what they know and what is changing, because their children and the communities in which they are members change constantly. In order to adapt to the constantly changing needs of their children, parents must adapt and continually learn. The emotional dimension embraces the individuality of the learner; each individual is made up of differing personality characteristics, traits, and qualifications that determine our ability and desire to learn. While some of these traits determine cognitive abilities, others, such as self-control, social orientation, and motivation fall within the emotional domain. Maslow's (1954) theory of self-actualization and hierarchy of needs emphasizes the various

motivations people have for doing and learning; the importance people place on activity is influenced by their need for the activity.

In addition to motivation, a person's frame of reference is an emotional sub-category of learning. "What we perceive and fail to perceive and what we think and fail to think are powerfully influenced by habits of expectation that constitute our frame of reference, that is, a set of assumptions that structure the way we interpret our experiences" (Mezirow 1991, p.1). Similar to Mezirow's "habits of expectations" are Brookfield's "assumptions" to describe "the seemingly self-evident rules about reality that we use to help us seek explanations, make judgments, or decide on various actions...People cannot reach adulthood without bringing with them frameworks of understanding and sets of assumptions that undergird their decisions, judgments, and actions" (Brookfield 1990, p.178). These assumptions and habits of expectation guide our emotions about the learning we experience, helping us to make decisions about the importance and relevance of the learning in our lives. We place greater importance on learning things that are relevant and important to us.

Adding to the relevance and importance is the role of time in learning. For example, Havighurst's (1972) concept of the teachable moment states that the optimum time of learning is in conjunction with developmental tasks that occur at particular times in a person's life. This concept parallels one of Knowles' (1980) assumptions of andragogy – that an adult's readiness to learn is closely tied to the developmental tasks and social roles of adult life. Therefore, parents who have children in school and want to help them learn will be ready to learn what is

needed in order to reach their goal. Unfortunately, when considering parent involvement, research focuses almost exclusively on the learning of the children. The issue of parents as learners who make meaning of their roles over time is rarely examined.

One of the earliest theories of social learning was developed by Albert Bandura (1989a), whose theory of learning by modeling and imitation led to his famous Bobo-doll experiment, in which children imitated the adults' hitting that they watched on videotapes. Another social learning theorist is Peter Jarvis (1987), who says that children learn through a combined internal and external learning process. Social constructivists take learning a step further by suggesting that our behavior is dependent on the situations in which we find ourselves, and that we are different people in different situations. Social constructivists find that, although learning occurs within a person, it is shaped by what happens outside of the person and cannot be separated from its social context (Vygotsy, 1978). The context of the school has important implications for family involvement and can act as a facilitator or deterrent.

Learning in adulthood is often shaped by pragmatism – we learn what we must learn as we find the need for that learning. John Dewey's (1938) theory of plasticity said that adults have the capacity to learn from experience (mistakes) and to build on this learning, and this helps them to increase their capacity to learn. Dewey saw two central principles in experience -- the continuity of what has gone before and the interaction that takes place between an individual and what constitutes his environment. In other words, experience is always

dependent on what has happened before – what we learned from our parents, what is happening now, and what we are presently experiencing with our children. One of the main tenants of adult education is that a person's experiences are fundamental to learning. Each parent's experiences in raising children will be different from that of other parents; in fact, even the same parents raising two different children will have different experiences. Therefore, people will have their own experiences with learning how to help their children in school, and these differences should be considered when family involvement activities are planned.

Another connection of family involvement to adult education is appreciation for what each parent has to offer. Many teachers have a deficit view of working-class parents that assumes low skills, but schools that hope to build student achievement through family involvement would have better success if they emphasized and capitalized on the wealth of knowledge that parents contribute to their children's education (Nesbitt, 2005). The literature suggests that parents who are encouraged to share their experiences and who are given thoughtful instruction to help increase their skills may be in a better position and place to help their children learn more effectively. The next chapter will focus on the methodology for my study of parents' perspectives of family involvement.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHOD AND RATIONALE

Strauss and Corbin (1998, p 10-11) define qualitative research “as any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification.” Qualitative research allows the researcher to explore the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspective of the person who has experienced it. Once the researcher has decided to conduct a qualitative study, he or she must decide on a tradition or strategy of inquiry. This chapter includes a description of grounded theory, recruitment of participants, data collection, and data analysis.

Grounded Theory Method

The tradition of inquiry I selected for this study is the grounded theory method. The goal of grounded theory is to generate a theory that relates to a particular situation; to find out “what’s going on” and what it means to the people experiencing the situation. The grounded theory method of research was introduced by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). In a critique of the differences that began to emerge between Glaser and Strauss, Wayne Babchuk (1997) wrote:

Grounded theory methodology emerged as an alternative strategy to more traditional approaches to scientific inquiry which relied heavily on hypothesis testing, verification techniques, and quantitative forms of analysis which were particularly popular in the

social sciences at that time. Whereas many of the central components of grounded theory were outlined in *Discovery* (e.g., constant comparison, theoretical sampling, coding procedures, etc.), subsequent publications by Glaser and Strauss writing alone or with others, began to reflect important differences in how these scholars envisioned grounded theory and its use. As a result, it can be argued rather convincingly (see Glaser, 1992) that two somewhat distinct methodologies have evolved based on the original work, each with its own underlying epistemology and attendant properties.

Although Glaser and Strauss teamed to introduce grounded theory, they subsequently diverged in their views about the methodology. One major difference between Glaser and Strauss focuses on analysis of the data; Glaser's view suggests a more flexible analysis that is guided by the realities found in the words of the participant rather than by the process of the analysis, while Strauss finds the details of the data analysis process to be extremely important. Glaser insists that in order to allow the theory to emerge naturally, the data should not be forced into models and charts. Strauss and Corbin (1990), meanwhile, suggest that the data analysis would be enhanced through the use of analytic tools such as their paradigm model (p.96).

Although the main ideas of constant comparison and coding laid out in *Discovery* remain the foundation of both Glaser's and Strauss's descriptions of grounded theory, I chose to use Glaser's version of data analysis because I find

his insistence on allowing the theory to emerge from the data to be fundamental to the intent of grounded theory. I attempted to remain true to the words and ideas expressed by my research participants when I coded and sorted the data into categories. However, there is never just one author who has the final say about a topic. Therefore, I continued to look to various authors for further elucidation of the intricacies of grounded theory and have used the advice and opinions of other authors in addition to Glaser.

What differentiates grounded theory from most other qualitative traditions of research is that its objective is the emergence of a theory rather than the testing of one. Instead of beginning with a hypothesis and using data to test it, in grounded theory the researcher must set aside what he or she knows to allow the theory to be “grounded” in the data. This is a departure from other research methods in which the research is conducted in order to support or refute a theory. In grounded research, what one already “knows” must be put aside in order to allow the emerging concepts to emerge.

I chose grounded theory as the method for my study because it best fits my convictions about how people place themselves within their worlds. Two theories that inform my views are Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) ecological systems theory, which argues that human development must be considered within the social systems that surround such development, and Blumer’s (1969) symbolic interactionism, which focuses on the meanings of interactions and events to people and the symbols they use to convey that meaning. I believe grounded theory is congruent with both of these theories through its insistence on staying

“grounded” in the meanings of the data to the people who are experiencing the phenomena.

The strategy of grounded theory is “generally compatible with symbolic interactionism – the presumption that “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” (Wells, 1995). Grounded theory is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents (Backman, 1999). According to Glaser (1978), the presupposition of an inductive approach is that the researcher has as few preconceived ideas about the research as possible to preclude biased interpretation of the phenomenon.

However, because reading the literature may narrow the topic of research, the grounded theory approach may also be used when there is already some knowledge about the research phenomenon, but a new point of view is sought (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this case, bracketing (setting aside acknowledging one’s prior assumptions about the topic) is used to set aside presuppositions about the data that will be collected.

However, Strauss & Corbin (1998. p.99) wrote,

We know that we never can be completely free of our biases, for so many are unconscious and part of our cultural inheritances. We find it more helpful to acknowledge that these influence our thinking and then look for ways in which to break through or move beyond them.

Therefore, researchers using grounded theory must become aware of prior knowledge and assumptions about the situation being observed, and use that awareness to be sensitive to what is being discovered and not allow biases to

color their view of the data. A self-assessment of my prior knowledge and assumptions pointed out that my beliefs are that a) children of parents who are involved in their education have a support system that provides an advantage over children who do not have parental support, b) some parents might not have the resources needed to support their children's education, and c) most parents want to do their best for their children but may not know what needs to be done.

There are both strengths and limitations to the grounded theory method of research. One of the most positive attributes of the method is that it is a qualitative method that allows the researcher to paint a picture of what is being studied, rather than simply reporting the numbers of people being studied. Qualitative data supplies an understanding of the "whys" and "hows" of a phenomenon.

In addition, comparative contrasting and theoretical sampling allow the researcher to take the time to go back and interview other participants after analyzing initial data, providing a "second chance" to obtain what will help define emerging categories as well as an opportunity to further develop an emerging theme. Most importantly, in the grounded theory method the researcher really works to stay grounded in what the participants see as important in the phenomena, rather than working hard to fit the participants into an already-developed category.

Theoretical Sampling.

The selection of participants for this study used the theoretical sampling advised by grounded theory experts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin,

1990). Theoretical sampling is a term coined by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 in the context of social research to describe the process of choosing new research sites or research cases to compare with one that has already been studied. Unlike statistical sampling, theoretical sampling cannot be totally planned before beginning a study because the determination of new sites or cases cannot be made until the researcher discovers the areas in which he or she needs to focus and find new information. However, my “plan” was to begin with selective sampling of parents in one urban school and then move on to another school if I ran out of participants or needed other information

Using grounded theory, it was impossible to predict the sample size prior to conducting data collection. Strauss & Corbin (1998) state that sampling is completed when categories are saturated. However, Creswell (1998) suggests that interviews with 15-30 people might be needed to saturate categories and detail a theory. Therefore, I planned to interview at least 15 people and continue until I find there was nothing more being added through further interviews. I was able to stop at 15 interviews because no new information was being disclosed.

Limitations.

There are limitations to grounded theory. One limitation is that in this type of methodology, findings have limited generalization that may not fit all of the people in a population. In addition, grounded theory is a time-consuming method that requires the researcher to go back and forth between data collection and analysis, most often requiring a longer period of time being devoted to the study. Because constant comparison and saturation are needed in order to know when

sufficient data have been collected, the researcher cannot plan ahead for the sample – the number of interviews or those whom the researcher might recruit. A final limitation on using grounded theory is that scholars are familiar with the literature; therefore, it is difficult to separate other studies from one's consciousness and to keep pre-suppositions under wraps. Although I considered each of the limitations before choosing the grounded theory method for my study, I believed it was the most appropriate method for my purpose.

Specific Procedures

In this section, I review the procedures I used to conduct the study, beginning with forms and recruitment of participants, and ending with data collection. This section will assist readers to better understand the grounded theory method of research.

Forms.

The forms created for this study are attached, including (a) Recruitment Flyer; (b) Contact with Participants to Obtain Feedback Response; (c) Informed Consent Form; (d) Demographic Data Form; (e) Interview Protocol; and (f) Confidentiality Agreement for Research Group Members. Explanations of the instruments and forms have been included within the text.

Pilot.

A pilot study was done with one parent to assess the effectiveness of the interview protocol. If the pilot participant did not understand the questions, I reworded the questions until the participant felt comfortable with them. The data from the pilot study is not included with the findings.

Site.

All participants in the study were parents from an urban school in East Tennessee; therefore, this section begins with a description of the school and the participants. Parents were recruited from an urban elementary school in East Tennessee with just over 400 students. The population includes a high percentage of at-risk students and families in crisis; 52% of students are white and 48% minority. Eighty-seven percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch. The mobility rate or the rate at which students move in and out of the school is 52%, and approximately 45% of students live in a public housing development or in federally-subsidized housing.

The school's faculty includes one principal, one assistant principal, one administrative assistant, a curriculum and instruction facilitator, two literacy leaders, twenty-six regular classroom teachers, one resource teacher, two child development instructors, one behavior program teacher, four Title I teachers, and one technology specialist and six full time teacher assistants.

Recruitment and Selection of Participants.

Participants in this study were recruited from a convenience sample of elementary school parents in the above-mentioned school. A flyer was distributed to all parents by the Principal. Parents who were interested in volunteering to participate in the study were asked to contact me, or to return the completed flyer to the principal, who held them for me. I received 39 responses from the 400 flyers sent home to parents.

As requested by the principal and assistant principal, I sent a list of the

names of responders to the principal and assistant principal of the school so that they could see what kind of response I was receiving. Although I did not request this additional information, they collaborated on and returned my list, adding a column to tell me which of four categories they perceived each of the 39 respondents as falling into:

- a. Ease of contact (easy, difficult)
- b. Returns required information
- c. Attends PTO, volunteers
- d. Do not know this parent

When I proposed this study, I had not intended to include information from school personnel, but their list gave me a basis for comparing parent perceptions of their involvement with administrators' perceptions of parent involvement.

Although administrators included information about all 39 responders, I have only included information on those parents whom I interviewed in the following table.

Parents were selected for participation by;

a) Timeliness of response – parents were called in the order in which their forms were returned to me. Messages were left for those who were not available to answer the telephone when I called.

b) Perception of ease or difficulty of contact by administrators – I tried to include parents who were deemed by administrators as difficult to contact because I wanted the input of parents who were possibly not routinely involved in their children's education.

c) Ability to reach and schedule parents – some parents did not answer

their phones and/or did not return calls. In addition, some parents were unable to find time in their busy schedules to be interviewed.

Table 1 includes administrators' perceptions of parental involvement of the fifteen participants who ultimately took part in this study. All participant names are pseudonyms. Parent pseudonyms were created to coincide with the ordering of interviews; for example, Ann was the first interviewee, and was given a name beginning with the first letter of the alphabet.

Table 1. Administrators' Perceptions of Parent Involvement

Name	Easily Contacted	Difficult to Contact	Returns Required Information	Attends PTO, Volunteers	Do not Know this Parent
Ann	X		X	X	
Betty	X		X		
Charles					X
Donna	X		X		
Ellie					
Fran	X		X	X	
Grace					
Hayley		X			
Ida	X		X		
Jenna	X		X	X	
Karen	X		X		
Lara			X		
Mary			X		
Naomi					X
Olivia	X		X		

Figure 2 shows where each participant fell along the continuum of involvement as perceived by school administrators. Parents who were difficult to contact and whom were not known by administrators fell at the left of the continuum, and parents who were easily contacted, returned forms and assignments, and volunteered at school fell on the right side of the continuum. Parents who participated in this study were balanced fairly evenly across the four categories. The amount of involvement perceived by administrators is shown in Table 1.

Contacting participants.

As I contacted responders, I explained the purpose of the study and the plan for data collection to each participant by telephone before the participant agreed to become part of the study. Once the participant agreed to participate, a meeting place, time, and date was established. Each participant was given the consent form, which was explained before he/she was asked to sign. All forms

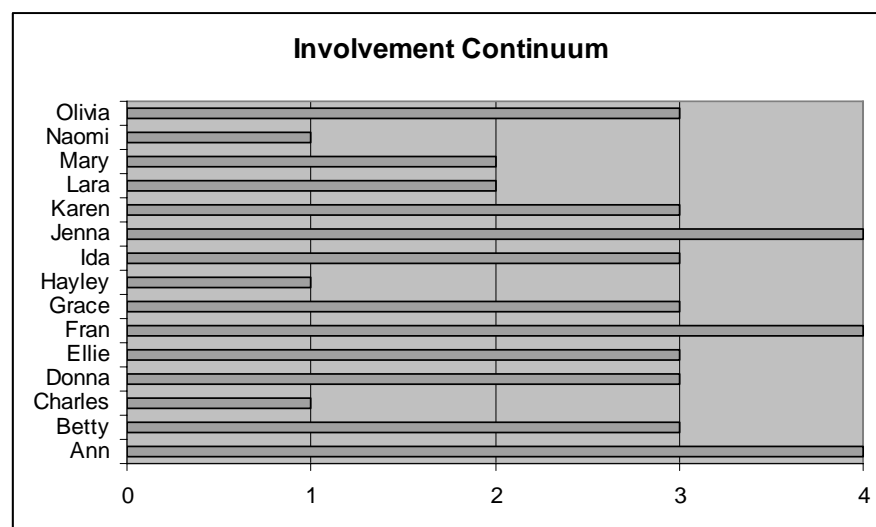


Figure 2. Involvement Continuum

connected to this study were collected and kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home.

The first five parents who met the criteria (parents of at least one child in grades K-5) and agreed to participate were asked to meet me at a place and time convenient for the participant. The meeting sites chosen by parents were most often their homes, but one parent chose to meet at the child's school, and two chose to meet at fast-food restaurants. Although I worried about the lack of privacy and quiet at the fast-food restaurants, the times chosen for the interviews were not busy times, and in both cases we were able to find an out-of-the way table that afforded acceptable privacy.

I created a telephone log with the names of parents who responded to my call for participants and began calling volunteers for the study. It was difficult to reach many of the volunteers; I found that some telephone numbers had been disconnected and some of the numbers given to me belonged to other family members or friends, so messages had to be left with the telephone's owner and relayed to the parent volunteer. In addition, I left messages on many phone answering systems, but call-backs were infrequent. Often, the parents did not respond after the first phone call, and I frequently had to call three or four times. In addition, there were many times when parents cancelled at the last minute, or when parents were not at home at the scheduled interview time. I learned to use my cell phone to make calls rather than my home phone, because then parents had my call-back number and were able to call me to let me know if they would be unable to meet with me. I also learned to call parents the night before the

interview to remind them of the time we had scheduled and to see if the interview was still convenient for them, and to ask them if they wanted another call again an hour before the meeting. These calls helped me cut down on the number of “no-shows” I experienced in the beginning of the process.

Participant Information.

Participants included 1 male and 14 female family members. Tables 2a and 2b provide information about the participants in this study. Once five participants had been interviewed and the data had been transcribed and analyzed, five additional participants were interviewed with the data from previous interviews in mind. The process continued through a third set of 5 interviews, constantly comparing data and choosing questions that would clarify comments from previous interviewees. My original plan was to contact a second school if I did not receive sufficient responses from parents at the first school. However, I received 39 responses and was able to schedule and complete interviews with 15 of those responders. Therefore, because I reached saturation by the fifteenth interview, I did not need to use a second school.

Data Collection

Creswell (1994) suggests that researchers should create two forms of questions for a study – main questions and sub-questions. As stated in chapter one, my main research question was, “*What do parents perceive family involvement to constitute, how did they learn to be involved, and what are their reasons for involvement?*” Sub questions that would help me to elicit this information, along

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Number of Children	Ages of Children	Grade Levels of Children	Last grade you completed in school
Ann	33	2	8, 14	3, 9	12
Betty	33	2	6, 7	1, 2	Bachelor's degree
Charles	54	2	7, 16	2, 11	13
Donna	26	1	5	K	12
Ellie	33	2	13, 7	7 th , 1 st	11
Fran	26	5	6, 4, 2, 2, 9 months	1 st , Pre-K, daycare	12
Grace	35	4	7, 6, 4, 2	1 st , 2 nd	12 (a few college courses)
Hayley	28	3	6, 6, 4	3, 1, daycare	GED
Ida	25	2	6, 3	1 st , daycare	12 th (college courses now)
Karen	25	2	6, 4	K, Head Start	Some college
Jenna	30	3	11, 9, 7	5, 3, 2	Associate degree
Lara	26	3	9, 6	3, 1	9 (working on GED)
Mary	30	4	13, 8, 5, 2	8, 2, pre-k	Associate Degree
Naomi	36	3	7, 4, 2	1 st , pre-k	Bachelor's Degree
Olivia	36	1	6	1	Bachelor's Degree

Table 2 continued.

Name	Marital Status	Currently employed?	If so, what kind of work do you do?	Race Ethnicity	Gender
Ann	Married	yes	Business Owner	White	Female
Betty	Married	no	Iraq: Business mgt. USA: cook	Iraqi	Female
Charles	Divorced	yes	Construction	African American	Male
Donna	Single	no	Certified Nursing Asst	White	Female
Ellie	Married	Yes	Nursing Assistant	White	Female
Fran	Single	No	Clerical	African American	Female
Grace	Married	No	Certified Nursing Asst	Caucasian	Female
Hayley	Separated	No	Learning computer	Caucasian	Female
Ida	Single	Yes	Cashier	African American	Female
Karen	Married	No	Accounting	Caucasian	Female
Jenna	Single	No		Caucasian	Female
Lara	Single	Yes	McDonalds	Hispanic	Female
Mary	Single	Yes	Nurse technician, Pharmacy	African American	Female
Naomi	Divorced	Yes	Administrative	Caucasian	Female
Olivia	Married	Yes	Marketing	Caucasian	Female

with probes to help get the conversation started if a parent did not have an answer to the question, are listed in the interview protocol following participant demographics tables,

Interview Protocol.

The following questions formed the basis for my interviews. Probes were to be used if participants found the question difficult to understand, but were seldom needed.

- 1) What does family involvement in your children's education mean to you?

Probe: What kind of things do you think families can do to help their children learn?

- 2) What have your experiences been with family involvement?

Probe: What kind of activities have you done to help your child with school and learning?

- 3) Is there any particular experience that stands out in your mind about family involvement?

Probe: Can you think of any time when you were involved with your child's education or learning? What did you think of the experience?

- 4) What has encouraged you to be involved?

Probe: Are there people or issues that have encouraged you to be active in your child's education?

- 5) What has discouraged you from being involved?

Probe: Are there people or issues that have discouraged you from

being active in your child's education?

6) Can you give me any example of what came from your involvement in your child's education?

7) Is there anything else you would like to say about family involvement?

Although these questions were the basis for beginning my study, the data that emerged from the early interviews influenced a change in the questions to address two emerging categories. I added two new questions to the interview protocol:

8) Do you allow your children to play outdoors in your neighborhood?

9) How were your parents involved in your education?

Interviews.

Each participant was asked the same questions as other participants, although later interviews included additional questions based on the data from early interviews. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, and were audio taped and transcribed; audio tapes were erased after transcription.

I interviewed each participant at a mutually selected site. Each participant was given the consent form (attachment C), which was explained before he/she was asked to sign. I explained the procedure for taping interviews so that they could be transcribed and studied later, and explained to participants the purpose of the study and the kind of questions that would be asked.

When the participants signed the consent form for the study, they were told that a summary of themes and quotes would be sent once the study had been completed so that I could assess whether the participant felt that the study

and themes had captured his/her experiences. Each parent gave me an address for sending the summary at the interview and I provided a self-addressed envelope for them to return the summary with their comments to me. No reference has been made in oral or written reports that could link participants to the study.

Glaser (1998) advised researchers not to tape interviews; he thought that taping and transcribing is counterproductive. In grounded theory one is not looking for details in the data but major patterns that repeat themselves, so Glaser finds taping and transcribing a waste of time that could be better spent conducting more interviews. However, due to the demands of dissertation research and the possibility of needing to return to the words of the interviewees, I taped my interviews and listened to them for sentences, phrases and words that were repeated and that clustered into categories.

Memoing and Bracketing.

I collected data from parents about their perceptions of family involvement, and kept a journal of the memos I made to myself during the interviews. I took key-word notes while listening to the interviews, recording my notes on a page that had been divided into thirds; two-thirds of the page contained a column for the participants' words and one-third contained a column in which I coded the notes into categories. I then made memos to myself in a computer document about the participants and my thoughts about their interviews. *Memoing* is a key feature of grounded theory. Dick (2005) explained memoing as "when an idea occurs to you, pause in what you are doing and write a memo to yourself ...

memoing helps to add relationships which link categories to each other.” I wrote memos about ideas that allowed me to refine thoughts that developed as I compared concepts in the incidents articulated by participants. My memos took the form of notes jotted in margins, tables of comparison, and diagrams and figures, helping me to develop concepts. These accumulated memos helped me to convert thoughts to words and words to concepts.

Throughout the data collection process, I also “bracketed” my assumptions by making memos to myself whenever I found that my own assumptions were becoming apparent to me and impinging on the ideas and the data I collected from participants. These bracketing notes were recorded in the journal I kept of notes from parents’ interviews.

Data Analysis Process

After I interviewed each participant, I transcribed the audio-taped interview and I inserted the interview transcription into a table that included the participant’s demographic information at the top of the page with each line of the interview written below (see Table 3). The page was divided into two columns; the left two-thirds of the page contained the participant’s words, while the right third of the page was left blank so that I could jot down any thoughts I had about what the participant was saying through his words. For example, in the interview segment shown below, I made notes in the column adjacent to the lines in which the participant mentioned relationships, pulling out words that seemed important to the participant and that got to the gist of what was stated. For example, the participant’s words, “Being there for their awards, anything and everything you

Table 3. Sample Interview Data Transcription Form/Open Coding

Pseudonym = Ann; I: Interviewer; P: Parent

Age	33	
Number of Children	2	
Ages of Children	8, 14	
Grade Levels of Children	3, 9	
Last grade you completed in school	12	
Marital Status	married	
Are you currently employed outside the home?	yes	
If so, what kind of work do you do?	Business Owner	
Race/Ethnicity	White	
Gender	Female	
	Incident	Open Coding
1	I: What does family involvement in a child's	
2	education mean to you?	
3	P: Well, I think, personally, I can only use myself,	Use myself
4	but I think being an involved parent in the schools is	
5	extremely important. There's a difference of not	Involvement important
6	being involved with a kid who does not necessarily	
7	know or is comfortable with their surroundings, and	child comfortable
8	it always helps when they're going to a new school,	new school
9	or a new grade, or to an upper grade, if the parent	new grade
10	gets involved. It helps to relieve the stress on the	relieves stress
11	child, especially when you have a relationship with	relationship
12	the teacher, a relationship with the principal... they	relationship
13	see you...your presence is most important and how	see you, presence important
14	you react to situations around you. I really think	see how you react
15	that, being there for their awards, anything and	being there
16	.everything that you can possibly do for your kids.	anything - everything
17	For their own self, to be comfortable, and to put	
18	them at ease. That's just the way I see it. She	put them at ease
19	(my daughter) knows me, she sees me, her friends	sees me
20	see me, she's just happier to know I am there.	she's happier
21	I: So do you think family involvement only happens	
22	at school, or do you think it happens at home, or...?	
23	P: I think it should happen all around. My husband	Should happen all around
24	and I are both very involved, in both school and	school and home
25	home as much as we can, because it all carries	carries over to home
26	over to the home. You want to know what's going	Know what's going
27	on when you're not there, and in order to do that	on when not there

can possibly do for your kids” was noted as two entries, *being there* and *anything, everything*. I analyzed each interview in this manner. In the grounded theory method, each interview is compared with previous interviews. After the first few interviews, I began to see some patterns developing in what I was hearing from parents. These items would eventually become categories or properties of categories that would eventually determine the theme of family involvement.

Constant comparison is the heart of grounded theory, an iterative process of examining and interpreting data. Rather than conducting a specific number of interviews before beginning data analysis, in the grounded theory method the researcher conducts interviews and analyzes data simultaneously. Constant comparison of the data meant that I compared each interview against the other interviews to see what was similar and different. For example, I coded the second interview with the first interview in mind. In this system of data analysis, initial data sets are compared to subsequent data sets, and all data sets are compared to developing theory.

Using Glaser’s (1978) method of grounded theory as a guide, I analyzed and coded in two phases, substantively and theoretically. Walker and Myrick (2006, p. 550) explained Glaser’s coding process as, “*Substantive coding consists of two sub-phases, open coding and selective coding, and is concerned with producing categories and their properties. Theoretical coding occurs at the conceptual level, weaving the substantive codes together into a hypothesis and theory.*” Glaser’s approach (1992) uses constant comparison, comparing

incidents with and against each other. In the first phase of Glaser's coding process, open coding, the researcher compares incidents and generates categories, and then compares new incidents with the categories that have been generated. In the second phase, selective coding, the researcher makes comparisons, examining the data to find out which category each incident fits into, or whether it fits at all. The researcher also uses memos to document his or her ideas during coding, and theoretical sorting, which organizes the data and memos and weaves them into an emerging theory. The data collection process I followed was similar to that described by Baker et al (1992):

“In grounded theory, data collection and analysis occur concurrently and are based on the constant comparative method. Early data are coded with words that describe the action in the setting, and as more information comes in, codes are revised and the data is recoded. Emerging concepts determine what information will be sought next and interview questions may change as the ongoing analysis sharpens the focus of the study. Categories develop from the clustering of codes that seem to fit together and are constantly compared with each other to ensure that they are mutually exclusive and cover the behavioral variations” (p.1358).

Coding.

The next phase in the grounded theory process was selective coding, in which I compared incidents and began to see properties that further defined the

incidents. This step is a type of sorting. I used a Microsoft Excel sorting system in which I “cut and pasted” concepts, moving them around repeatedly until I was satisfied they were in the appropriate places. During the sorting process, new ideas about the concepts and categories emerged and helped me to understand how an assortment of incidents fit within the range of categories. Memoing again took place in this stage; I typed or wrote directly alongside the words of the incidents and categories. This step helped me to see the various properties of the category and to begin to formulate a theory about what formulated the categories of family involvement for parents. Once the electronic sorting was finished, I placed the concepts into a table to illustrate the concepts and theory that emerged from the data.

Data analysis in grounded theory is not a linear process, taking the researcher from step 1 to step 2 to step 3 . . .,”Indeed, qualitative research, especially in the grounded theory tradition, is not for those who need tight structure with little ambiguity” (Orona, 1990, p.372) For me, the process began with step 1 (interviews), and progressed to step 2 (field notes, memos), but that was where the linearity ended. From there on, it was back and forth between the steps of data collection, recording notes about interviews, transcribing, coding, reflection, returning to notes and codes, and recoding. For each interview, I proceeded immediately through the following steps:

- a. Entered the information from the Demographic Data Form into the Interview table I had created
- b. Noted thoughts about interview (memos)

- c. Transcribed the interview onto the Interview form
- d. Read through the interview, jotting notes about participant's words and statements
- e. Reread words and notes to discover repeated categories

When I saw categories repeat, I made a notation to myself to be sure to ask about that area in future interviews. On a few occasions, participants brought up areas that were very powerful and strong to them, but which I had never read about or considered as being a factor in family involvement in children's education. One example of this is the activity of doing what needs to be done to keep children safe in their neighborhood, which many parents said was one of the things they concentrate on as an involved parent.

Once five interviews had been coded and categories began to emerge, I returned to the field to conduct additional purposive interviews that added to, refined, and developed the information I had already collected, and the process continued through this cycle. Therefore, throughout the grounded theory, I cycled through data collection and analysis. As I continued to collect data, code data, and find categories, core concepts emerged through frequency of mention (Dick, 2005). At this point, I continued collecting data to further develop the core concepts and the properties that defined the concepts. The process continued until saturation was reached and no new information was found that created additional knowledge or categories.

The second phase of Glaser's substantive coding, selective coding, is a process of comparing categories to find out what best describes a phenomenon.

During this process, some incidents are determined to be categories while others are seen as properties of categories. In the Table 4 below, I show the process of sorting incidents to determine which categories they best fit.

Once incidents have been coded and categories have been selected, theoretical coding is used to help the researcher find the relationships between the categories and integrate them into a theme. Table 5 shows the process of theoretical coding for several themes identified by participants in this study.

Figure 3 summarizes and illustrates the coding process in the Glaserian method of grounded theory. In open coding, the researcher takes statements and

Table 4. Substantive Coding: Selective Coding Phase

Incident - category or property	Which (if any) category does this fit into?
Being there	Support learning? Communication? Other?
Know what's going on	
See you, presence	
Relationship	
Carries over	

Table 5. Theoretical Coding

Category 1: Communication	Main/Overall Category of Family Involvement To Be Determined
Category 2: Support Learning	
Category 3:	
Category 4:	
Category 5:	
Category 6:	

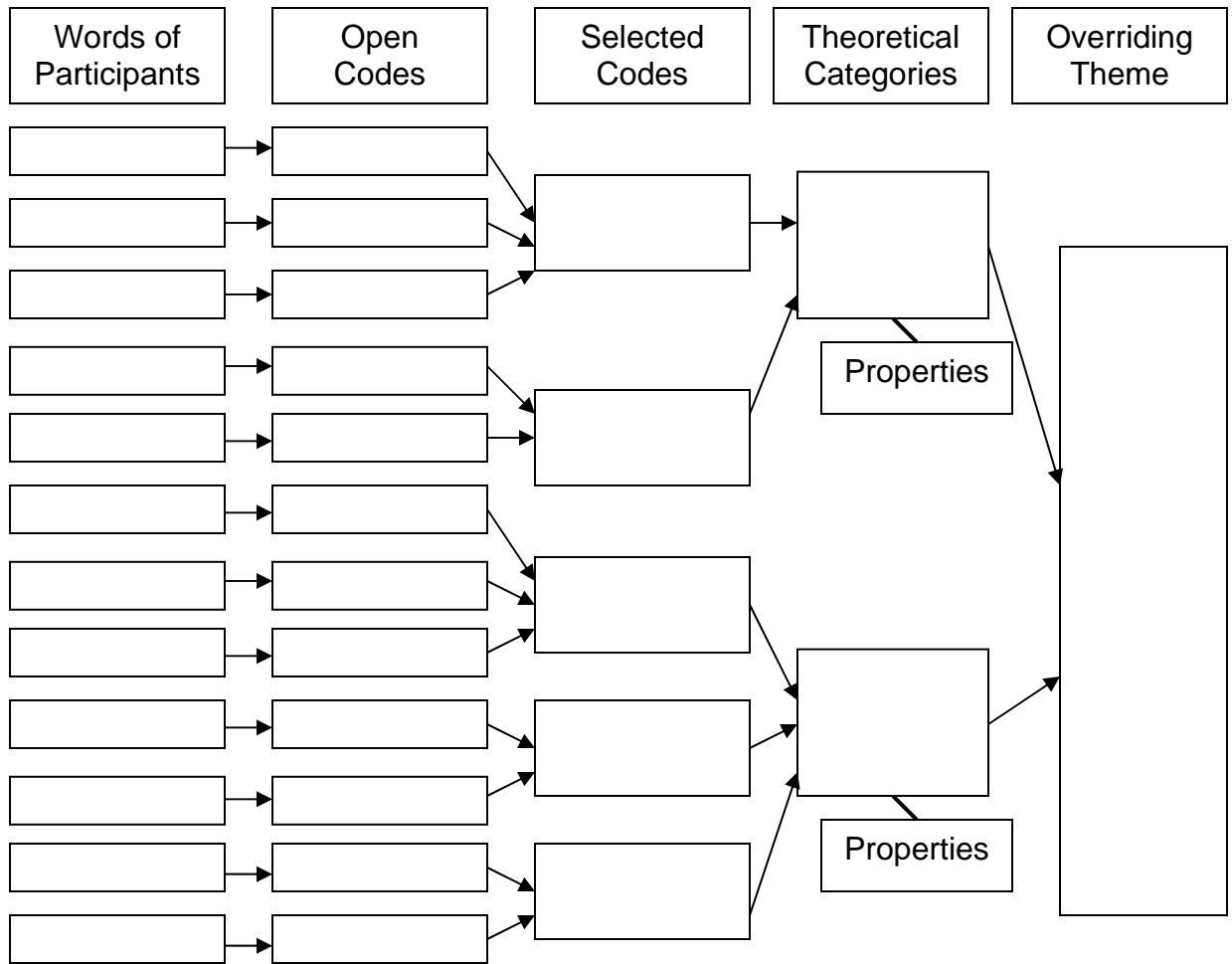


Figure 3: Illustration of Data Analysis Process

attaches labels to them. In selective coding, the researcher groups similar labels and moves them around to find where they best fit. Theoretical coding sorts through and finds relationships between categories to create major categories that have been deduced from the data, and an overall theme emerges.

Contributions from Research Group.

After coding and categorizing five interviews, I took my tentative list of categories and notes along with copies of my first transcribed interview to a group of doctoral students with whom I had been working for the past few years. Research groups in the college I attend are formed as efforts to help students better understand the research process. Participants had been told that for the purpose of data analysis and inter-rater reliability, transcriptions might be read and discussed by two to five doctoral students and one professor (members of a research group in the Educational Psychology and Counseling Department who enroll in EP655 in Spring semester 2006). The students and professor in the research group would help me to find themes and categories; their input would help me to triangulate the conclusions I drew from the data by. Denzin (1994) cites triangulation as one of the central ways to validate qualitative research evidence. Confidentiality forms were signed by each member of the research group and have been kept with data transcriptions in a locked file drawer in the researcher's home.

My research group was headed by my committee chair, with whom I have had a mentor/student relationship throughout my graduate school years. The research group is made up of the aforementioned professor and a group of

doctoral students who represented various levels of progression in the doctoral program, from new graduate students to those who were in the dissertation process, even including one recent Ph.D. recipient.

Therefore, my plan was to take my preliminary data to the research group for verification that I was on the right track. In my naiveté, I thought I had looked at all of the sub-categories of the data and that I had some possible categories already mapped out. However, I got so much more from the group than I had anticipated. Their suggestions about other meanings for the interviewee's comments opened up several new possibilities for me, and provided me with some directions for targeting questions in future interviews. After the success of this meeting, I made a commitment to return after all of my interviews were complete for another collaborative validation/brainstorming session to be sure I was not missing anything in my data analysis and findings.

One of the sub-categories of the data that I saw more clearly is how many times specific words were spoken by the participant. In the first interview, the word "see" was used repeatedly; "my daughter sees", "her friends see", the teachers see", "I see." For this parent, involvement made it easier for her to know what was going on because she could "see" it. I found that when participants used words more than a few times, it gave me insight into what was important to them.

After the meeting with the research group, I reread each of the five interviews that I had previously transcribed to see if I had gained any new insights into the participants' perceptions of family involvement. I was readying

myself to begin the next set of interviews and I wanted to be sure I was going in the right direction. I had gained a better understanding of the words of the first five interviewees through the process of reading the interviews, reflecting on them, listening to the comments of my peer graduate students and professor, and then rereading the interviews. But I did not want the previous interviews to encroach on my ability to really hear what the succeeding parents would say. Therefore, I had to remember to keep in mind the words of the first five participants, listen carefully to what the new participants were saying, and preclude hasty judgments that would disregard their voices and thoughts.

Adding Questions to Interview Protocol.

For the next set of interviews, I added two new foci to my interview protocol: how parents keep their children safe, and how they learned to be involved. Because several parents had described their thoughts about the importance of keeping their children safe as a key part of family involvement, I wanted to know if other parents agreed. Therefore, I decided to ask parents about the safety of their neighborhoods even if they did not bring it up on their own. However, almost all of the parents brought up the issue of safety without my prompting.

After final themes were induced from the data, the data were compiled into a report and a summary of themes and representative quotes was sent to participants for their feedback.

Data were coded for themes and categories, and then sorted for patterns. Once themes were identified, additional interviews were conducted and further

data analysis continued until no further themes were identified. Throughout all of the interviews, I heard themes being repeated, but in the earliest interviews I was hearing some occasional new information. By the thirteenth interview, I was not hearing any new ways of thinking about family involvement, and I made a decision to give myself two more attempts before determining that I had reached saturation. Saturation is the point at which no new information is emerging in the data, so that collecting new data will not add new knowledge about the topic. After transcribing the fifteenth interview, I concluded that I had reached saturation. I ended the interview process and returned to the data analysis process to complete it and write up the findings. The following chapter describes the findings about family involvement grounded in the perceptions and experiences of the parents.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter describes the findings of my analysis of the data I collected during my study, as well as the memos and field notes, reviewers' comments, and administrators' ratings of parent involvement. The main theme that became apparent through my analysis of the data is that the parents in this study would do whatever they thought it took – anything and everything – to help their children grow and succeed. This theme included two primary roles for parents, what they do to help their children succeed and how they learn to do it.

Figure 4 illustrates the findings of this study, depicting the theory that was grounded in the data: Parents perceive family involvement to be doing whatever it takes to help their children grow and succeed. Each of the categories is described in the next section. Quotes from parents identified by their pseudonyms illustrate each of the categories and sub-categories of in the findings.

Parents as Teachers and Facilitators

The first category of family involvement, *What Parents Do*, explains what parents do to help their children grow and succeed, and consists of four sub-categories: a) *communication*; b) *giving children reasons to learn*; c) *supporting learning*, and d) *ensuring children's success and growth*. Each of these sub-categories includes several properties.

Core Category:

Parents Do Whatever They Think it Takes to Help Their Children Succeed

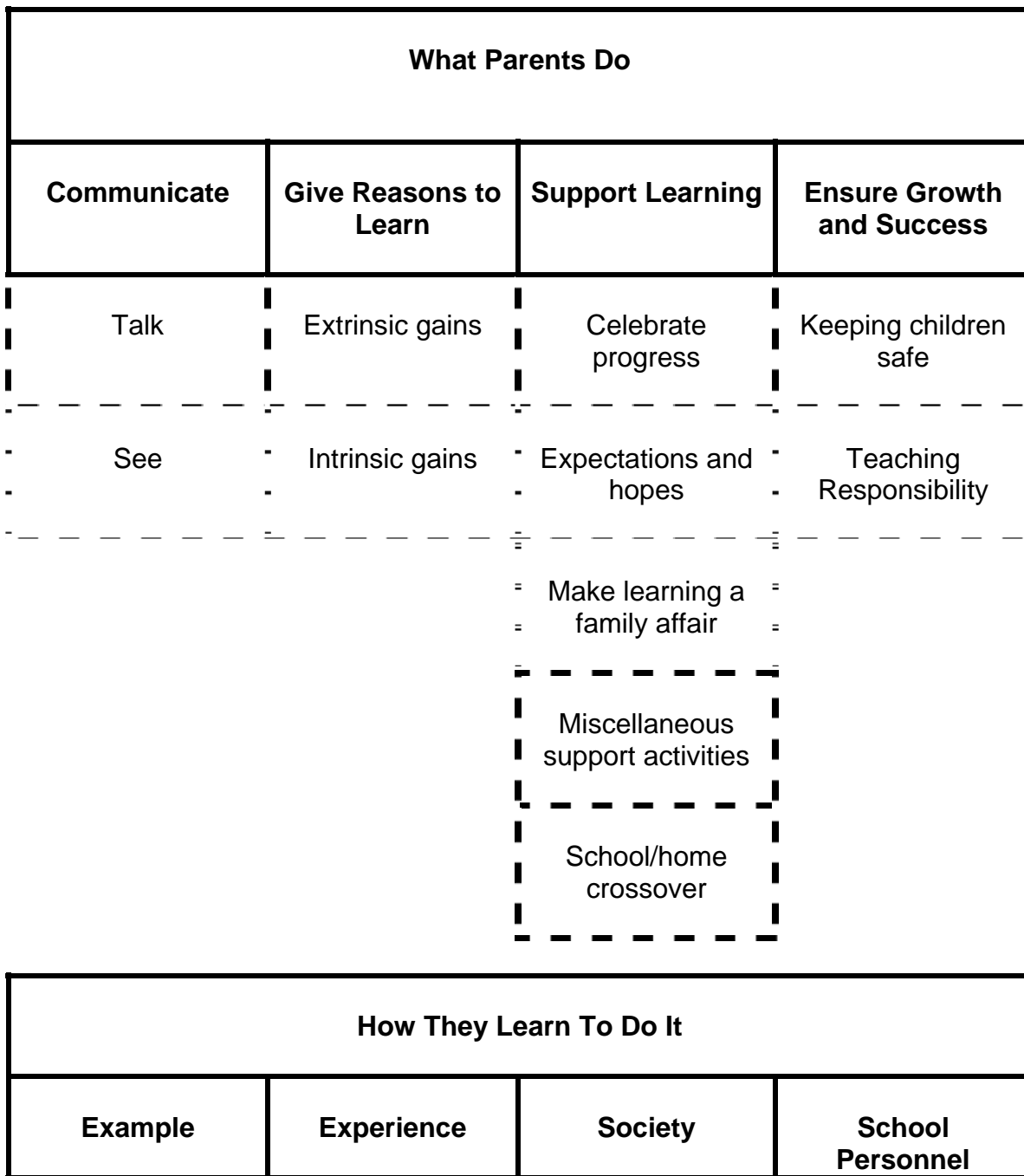


Figure 4. Family Involvement Theory

Communication

Each of the parents I interviewed listed communication as a major sub-category of family involvement in their children's education. Parents talk to teachers and administrators, to their children, and to each other. However, talking was not the only method of communication parents cited. Parents often used terms such as "knowing what's going on", "seeing what's happening", and "staying on top" to express positive sub-categories of communication. Therefore, communication included two properties: *Talking*, and *Seeing*.

Talking to Teachers.

By talking to teachers, parents were able to find out what their children were doing and to prevent problems. Communication was both formal and informal, and took many forms. Several parents spoke about more formal communication, such as parent-teacher conferences and other school meetings. Karen saw teacher meetings as a way to form a relationship with teachers, "*Throughout the year I meet with the teachers. I feel that's important because you have a personal connection with the teacher.*" Ann saw communication with the teacher as a way to be informed in a timely fashion about her child's progress. "*The communication I have with her teacher is phenomenal; any trouble she's having, we know about it right then.*" Lara, a parent whose native language is Spanish, commented on being able to communicate with her daughter's teacher, "*Although my first language is Spanish, I can understand English and I have good communication with the teacher. She lets me know what's going on at school.*"

Talking to the teacher did not only happen in such formal contexts as conferences and meetings. Parents sometimes took the opportunity to speak with teachers at school as they dropped their children off in the morning or picked them up at the end of the day. For example, Grace said she talked to the teachers “all the time. Well, like in the morning, sometimes I walk them in, or when I pick them up from school, I’ll go in and talk to them.” Charles got to know the school staff from his occasional visits to the school to have lunch with his son, and as a result, “the teachers, the principal, and the people who work in the office, they all know me.”

One part of talking with teachers involves the feeling of welcome and understanding parents feel the teacher is showing. Although my study did not address teacher perceptions, I could see from parent comments that they felt some teachers appeared to be more comfortable talking with parents than other teachers were. This study found corroboration with Epstein & Becker’s (1992) finding about stereotypical judgments. One African-American parent was very frustrated by teachers’ and administrators’ assumption that parents and children all fit a stereotypical mold. Mary said,

You can’t stereotype a whole group of kids or one race. Just because a child hangs with this child, you can’t assume the other child is going to do the same thing. The child’s parents may go for what that child does, but the other parents may not. And you need to speak with the parents and don’t assume anything.

The data show that parents do feel less welcome and less

knowledgeable about what their children are doing in school after they begin middle school. They want more feedback from teachers, and they don't want teachers to assume some parents don't care. Many parents commented on the need for teacher-parent partnerships. A few parents commented about teachers who expected less from certain populations, and about teachers who did not support their children, but most parents were pleased with the efforts their children's teachers made to keep them informed about their children's progress.

Another method of communication between parents and teachers was a folder that teachers sent home each day. Many parents commented about the daily folders, explaining that they showed them what happened in school that day. Parents were required to look at the work in the folder and read the teacher's comments, and then sign the folder and return it the next day. Parents viewed the folder as a strong, timely attempt to keep them informed and updated on how their children were doing in school, both grade-wise and behavior-wise. Donna, whose daughter was in kindergarten, said "*They send a folder home to tell you how they do each day. They keep me up on her progress. They let me know what's wrong and what she's doing right.*" Fran, whose son had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and sometimes exhibited behavior problems, felt that the folders kept her updated on his progress.

The teacher sends me home a worksheet folder each day. As they go through the day, she marks off points if they misbehave, and the points go down. If the points go below a level 2, she writes me a note and I write her back. Because you have to sign the folder and send it back in order for the

child to keep a good grade. So she lets me know how he's doing.

Parents especially appreciated communication about their children when there was nothing negative to report. They enjoyed hearing something good about their children. Parents were accustomed to hearing from teachers when there are concerns or complaints about their children, but not when they had been doing what was expected of them. Parents expressed surprise and delight when they received complementary calls about their children. Hayley was pleased when the principal took the time to call her about her son, *“My son has ADHD and he had some trouble with that. The principal called to talk to me about it and to tell me how proud she is that he is doing so well.”* Similarly, Mary realized how much principals have to do at school and appreciated a call the teacher made to her. She especially appreciated the principal's positive attitude.

They praise the kids when they do good things; they praise the kids when they are learning. I had a voice mail from the principal letting me know how glad she is with my daughter. They have hundreds of kids in the school, but she noticed my daughter and told me about it.

Parents did not always wait until the teacher got in touch with them to investigate problems; parents often made the first contact. The data show that parents were often proactive when communicating with teachers about problems they saw or questions they had concerning their children. They did not only contact teachers to complain, but also to help their children improve. Ellie spoke about wanting to know what was happening with her child and how she could help, *“Every year we have meetings with teachers, that's another way we're*

involved...see what you're doing wrong, see where there's problems at school.

We want to know what we can do to improve, how we can make it better."

Parents appreciated the fact that teachers made communication a priority. Olivia commented on her ability to talk to her daughter's teacher, *"I have my daughter's teacher's cell phone number; she gave it to us at the beginning of the year, so she is serious about communication."*

Sometimes parents knew their child was having a problem and contacted the teachers to find out more about the situation. Ann spoke of the steps she took when problems arose:

If I have a problem with my son's grades, we get the teachers together and go from one to the other to find out how he's doing in each class, what his strengths and weaknesses are. If there are any concerns, I can go in and say, "I need a meeting, what can I do, what's your schedule like, what do you ask of him"?

Several parents would like teachers to share more information about their children. Since parents saw contacting teachers as a duty of parents, they also saw contacting parents as a teacher's duty. Mary found that teachers sometimes make assumptions about how much parents know about problems that were happening, and so they did not contact parents. She commented about what she expects of teachers, *"The teachers know who I am and where to find me. So I expect them to tell me if there's a problem with my child's work or behavior. I want to know and I will work with them."* Similarly, Ellie spoke about the dwindling amount of contact once children begin middle school:

In the upper grades, you pretty much get your letters from teachers at the first of the year, but you don't really hear anything else after that.

They don't volunteer anything unless you contact them. I know they deal with a lot of kids every day, but they spend a lot of time with your kids, and they see their strengths and weaknesses. And I think it would be good to let parents know that their kids are doing this, and this, and this – good and bad. Hey, call me on the phone. I'd like to know more.

Many parents saw the teacher-parent team as a partnership. Karen said, "I call them and they call me – it's a good partnership." Lara reiterated the teamwork theme, "*We contact each other. When I want to know about my daughter or my son, I write the teacher a note and she answers it. I call her and she calls me.*"

Good communication between parents and teachers was a way to build trust and benefit children. Olivia spoke about the need for trust between teachers and parents.

If you think of it, the kids are in school for a good part of the day and the teacher is taking the place of the parents. So there has to be some trust between parents and teachers. It's the only way school will work.

The data show that parents value communication with teachers highly, and that communication is a major part of how parents are involved in their children's education. However, communication with other people was also highly valued.

Talking to Children.

Communication does not only happen with teachers; it happens with children too. Communication with children was usually done on a casual basis,

and was most comfortably accomplished at the dinner table, during drives to and from school, when tucking children in at night, or when watching television together. Naomi connected communication and family involvement in this way:

“My description of family involvement would be to talk with your children constantly. You don’t treat them as if they are babies. I’ve always talked with my son: I talk to him about everything – school, television, people, politics.....”

Parents often talk to their children about general things that affect their daily lives. For instance, Betty said,

I talk to them all the time. When they get home from school, I ask them, ‘What did you do in school today? What did you eat? What did you play? Who did you play with? Are you hungry? Do you have homework? Do you need help with your homework?’ I want to know what they like, what they fear, what they are worried or happy about.

Talking to children had many purposes. In addition to everyday talk that addressed the routine activities that happened in their children’s lives, parents often found themselves talking to their children about more serious issues.

Charles discussed a talk he had with this son during a difficult time, *“My son was having some peer pressure problems; he wanted to do what some of the other boys were doing. We had to have a heart-to-heart talk about the difference between survival and raising hell.”*

In addition to talking about problems and daily happenings, parents talked to their children to give them advice or help them deal with issues. Ann’s daughter was having difficulty with a school subject, and Ann told her, “Don’t

worry, because I've seen you work hard. I know you tried, and I've talked to your teacher. We're going to work on it, and you'll get it and it will be fine!" Similarly, Betty helped her daughter deal with shyness, "I tell her I was shy too and that she'll outgrow it like I did. I tell her to be nice to people and they will be nice to you." Hayley talked to her son to help him control his temper, "I talk to him and tell him I'm disappointed in him, and then we try to solve the problem. I'm a talk to them/problem solver kind of person." Parents rated *talking to children* at least as highly as they rated talking to teachers as a function of family involvement in education.

Talking to Other Parents.

Other parents were often a resource for parents. Parents usually communicated with each other in less formal manners, such as during school and community events, or when getting children together for activities. Parent communication was a good way for parents to hear about things their children might not be sharing with them, and sometimes helped to dispel rumors and false understandings. Of course, not all parent communication was welcome. Occasionally, parents told each other things they may not have wanted to hear. Betty spoke about talking to the mother of her child's friend,

I talked to the mother of one of the children my child invited to our house. I told her something that her daughter was worried about, and that she needed to pay attention. I'm not afraid to say things to parents if I feel they need to be said.

When Mary heard parents complaining about a teacher, she told them,

“it’s not always the teacher’s fault.” Sometimes parents probably heard things they did not want to hear from other parents, but even when communication was not pleasant, it might have helped parents share school and classroom information and compare their children’s development and progress with that of others.

Communication was an important part of family involvement, just as it was in other areas of life. Communication is the way parents find out what is happening with their child.

Seeing.

Seeing was less clear than talking, but parents viewed the communication part of family involvement as a way to “see” what was going on with their children. Sometimes, being involved in classrooms and schools helped parents to see things about the school, teachers, and students that they might not have understood without being involved. Ann spoke of investigating the quality of the school her child would be attending.

I was very judgmental when my daughter first starting going to this school. I actually almost transferred her when we were notified that the school was on notice. But my husband and I talked it over and became familiar with what was going on inside the school, and when I did visit the school, I could see what was going on, I could see the dedication and hard work of the teachers and administrators, and we made the decision that this was where we wanted our daughter to be.

Parents who are able to stay at home or work part time often make

considerable efforts to volunteer at school. Their presence was a boon to teachers who relied on their help and to other parents whose children are benefiting from teachers having more time to spend with students. The school also benefited from the additional supplies and services that fundraising provides. Ann owned a business with her husband and was able to coordinate her schedule to help at school. *"I laminate, work at parties, things like that. I help with the PTA, and my husband and I went to the school board to ask for some help for our school. We also help with soccer and dance."*

However, the few parents who were able or who chose to stay at home acknowledged that they make sacrifices to stay at home. Jenna chose to stay at home, *"It was our mutual decision that we didn't want our son in daycare and someone else to be teaching him the things we wanted him to learn. However, that decision limited family income, and "our friends make a lot more money than we do and have nicer things, cars and things like that."* Jenna realized that she and her husband were responsible for their decision, *"But this is what we wanted, and it's our priority, to keep them out of daycare and to be able to be home for them."* Jenna went on to talk about this being the right decision for her family, *"But I love it, I really do. I like seeing his face and having him ask, "Are you going to my school today?"* Therefore, just as in many areas of life, family involvement necessitated choices. Parents were often required to give something up in one area in order to gain something in another area. Whether the choices involved time, money, convenience, or changing work schedules, parents who valued education made the choices from those options available to them in order to help

their children.

In some cases, parents who had previously been more involved in the classroom, but whose life circumstances had changed their level of involvement, regretted their decreased presence in the schools. Karen's poor health prohibited her presence at school, although she previously had been very involved with in-school activities. *"I love being at school. I worked in the classroom and always went on field trips. And this year I am not able to do to it. I miss being so involved."*

Even when parents could not be physically present to see what happens at school, communication gave them a way to "see" or understand what was happening in their children's life, both in and out of school. Most parents saw "staying on top" of their children as an important part of parental support and involvement. Ellie spoke of the need to attend to her daughter, *"we have to stay and stay and stay on her. We really have to watch everything, or she'll just rush through it to get it done."* Charles also spoke of the need for staying power, *"You have to stay with it, let them know you love them no matter what, and that education is the number one tool in today's society. Without it they'll be lost."*

Parents also spoke of the need for persistence in seeing that children do what is expected of them in school. Mary commented on the need for parents to be diligent in their oversight of children's efforts in school.

The learning thing starts at home from day one, from the time they come out of your womb. If you're not reading to them, asking them what they need to do for school...a child is not going to come home and say they

have homework or a book report to do, unless you have a perfect child, and I don't think there are too many of those. So you need to ask, and if you don't ask, you'll never know. So be involved – ask your child, “Did you get your homework done, let me see your book report, let me see your work.

Communication with teachers, with other parents, and with children helped parents to know if their children were making the kind of progress they wanted them to make and to see if they were doing what was expected of them. According to parents, this search for knowing and seeing was a major part of family involvement.

Giving Children Reasons to Learn

The second major sub-category found in my family involvement research data was that parents work hard to give their children reasons to learn. Most often, these reasons were somewhat more pragmatic than the reasons teachers might have for children's learning. While teachers might have been prone to see learning as an end in itself, parents were more likely to see learning and education as a means to an end. Therefore, the reasons for learning that parents most often gave to their children revolved around the material gains that they could realize from their effort, with cognitive or emotional rewards taking a back seat. Properties of giving reasons to learn include both explicit and non-explicit types of gain.

Explicit Gain.

Explicit gains were those that were clear and specific, such as higher salaries and better grades. Parents related that they often used themselves as examples when giving their explicit children reasons to learn. They spoke of hard work and low wages without an education, and that they wanted more for their children. When children are young, they often wanted to be like Daddy or Mommy, but parents wanted their children to have better lives. Ida's daughter *"always says she wants to be like me and work at Taco Bell. I tell her no, you want to do better than that. Having an education will be better for them, you know?"* Similarly, Karen said she wanted her children *"to be better than I am, and being involved in their school is the only way I'm going to make that happen."* When I asked her what she meant by "better", she replied, *"I mean more advantages; I want them to have more in life than I have."*

Parents often pointed to their own struggles as examples when they told their children why education was necessary, as Ann did when she asked her children, *"See how hard your daddy works. Do you want to do that? Do you want to work that hard labor, or do you want to go to college and get trained in something and really take off?"* Fran also used herself as an example for higher education when she said, *"Even though I did go to school for a little while for medical billing and coding, you have to go further than just getting a certificate to get the kind of job you want. I want them to do better and go far in life. So I use myself to show them if they only go this far then they'll only make this much."* In other words, parents believed that more education would enable their children to

get higher wages, less physical work, and a better life.

Several parents tied the pursuit of material rewards to education. Ellie used education as if she were dangling a carrot on a stick in front of her child, *“She’s always looking at those magazines with million dollar houses in them, and I tell her, “You can have it. There’s nothing standing in your way; you just need to try.”* Hayley admonished her children to work hard in order to get the things they wanted in life,

I’d like my kids to get the kind of training that they’ll need for tomorrow’s life. I tell them if they don’t they might as well forget all the things they want. I struggle because I don’t have much education and they want too much. I tell them it takes a lot of work and education to get all the things they want, and they need to work on it now, because what you do now counts just as much as what you do later.

Charles talked to his son about his own aborted effort in college, telling him that Dad’s income was limited because he had not finished college and that he was unable to provide all of the things his son wanted. Therefore, his son should prepare to get them on his own through finishing his education. Charles told his son, *“You’ve done shook this tree; there’s nothing else falling out of this tree. Let’s face it, to go further, you’ve got to go ahead and go to school and get a degree.”* Charles continued along this train of thought, saying, *“He knows that to get a degree is money. If you get a degree, that’s money in your pocket.”*

Parents used their personal experiences as lessons for their children, telling them about the mistakes they had made and hoping that their children would

benefit from hearing about those mistakes.

Implicit gain.

Implicit gains were often hidden or implied. A few parents also found reasons that did not have a connection to outward gain to make children want to do well in school. Some saw education as not just a way to earn more money, but also a way to earn a better and happier life. One family was very involved with helping homeless people, and found that by involving their children in their efforts, they were showing them that happiness consisted of more than material wealth. Grace spoke of a more altruistic reason for seeking the better life education can provide.

One reason I give my children for getting an education is to be able to help those who need help. It really warms my heart when they say, "When I grow up I'm going to give my money to people who need it" And I think that's an important lesson to learn. We don't have a lot, but what we have, we share. (Grace)

To many parents, a better life also meant more satisfaction. Having more education meant that one might have a more fulfilling job than what was available without higher education. For example, Ellie explained the difference between a job and a career, "A job is something that most people have to do; they don't really enjoy it but they have to go to it every day. You enjoy having a career more than you enjoy having a job. I try to use myself as an example. I tell them I'd be doing a lot better if I had a career."

In addition to seeing education as a path to college and better jobs, one

parent found an immediate reason for her daughter to increase her effort in school. Ellie's daughter wanted to sign on with a modeling agency, but the agency would only hire youngsters who were good students.

My daughter wants to model, and the agent from the modeling agency explained to the girls that a lot of their clients want the girls to have at least a C average, and some want an A/B average. When my daughter heard that, she said if we would let her try modeling she would really try to get her grades up. So if it's going to give her an incentive to do that, it might be worth it.

Several parents also talked to their children about the difficulty of trying to earn a GED as an adult rather than continuing school while they are still being supported by parents. Lara spoke of the difficulty of combining work, school, and family, "I get tired. I work, I go to school, and take care of the kids. I just want my GED so I can get a better job." When Lara's children told her they did not like school or they did not want to go to school, she told them, "If you don't want to be like me, you better finish school." Karen's story paralleled Lara's:

I dropped out of school and had to go back and get my GED. It was harder to get my GED than it would have been to stay in school and get my diploma. And that would be one of my goals, to keep my kids in school. I tell them that every day.

Supporting Learning

Just as each of the parents I spoke with mentioned communication, they also spoke of ways in which they supported learning. But while they readily came

up with examples of communication, they were not as clear about what supporting education meant to them. The data showed that although they had learning as a goal for their children, they did not seem prone to self-reflection about the ways they supported and encouraged learning. However, their stories spoke volumes about what they do to support their children's learning, and some of the areas showed creative ways to help children learn. I found the sub-category of *learning support* included five properties: *celebrations of progress; expectations and hopes; learning as a family affair; miscellaneous support activities; and school/home crossover.*

Celebrations of Progress.

Specific celebrations of progress were mentioned by most parents, ranging from material incentives to more emotional compensation. Some parents rewarded good grades and behavior with special times out together or by purchasing desired items. Donna, a single mother who was attending school on a welfare program, rewarded her daughter with substantial treasures. Donna said, *"Any time she does good in school, I give her a reward. Her bicycle, a cockatiel; some kind of reward. I tell her if she keeps up the good work, there'll be something else – another surprise."* Ellie and her husband rewarded their children with monetary prizes, *"For every good grade they get, they used to get \$5. This time, one daughter brought home \$50 worth of A's, so we told her, "we can't afford to give you that much, but we'll get you a CD."*

Sometimes parents rewarded children with special time together, such as a meal or a trip to a store. Fran said, *"if he can bring me home a 100 on his*

behavior every day, at the end of the week we'll go to the store and he'll get a treat, or one weekend we'll go to Chuck E. Cheese to celebrate his doing good in school."

Other parents used simpler rewards. Grace talked about how she rewarded her children's efforts: "*When they come home with first honors, I tell them I'm proud. It's more emotional. We'll do something simple, like, 'You can help me make cookies tonight'.*" The cost of the reward did not seem to have any correlation with the appearance of parents' high or low income; the rewards were more in tune with what the parents thought their children would like. However, each of the parents saw the rewards as incentive for their children to put in the effort to do good work, and as a compensation for hard work.

Along with rewards for good work, parents often used penalties for poor effort. When children did not perform up to their abilities, parents found ways to let them know about their displeasure. However, many of the parents spoke of the need to be flexible about the penalties so that children did not become discouraged. Punishments did not appear to be physical; they were often "talking-to's", or withholding of favorite toys or privileges. Ellie used the privilege-subtraction method, "*When they don't do well in school, we don't punish them, but we take things away from them – privileges like going to the mall with her friends.*" Grace agreed, saying, "If they weren't trying, I'd probably cut some TV time or some playtime." Hayley preferred talking to her son as a means of figuring out what went wrong.

I would talk to him and tell him I'm disappointed in him. I might make him

sit in his room or take his game away, but not really too much punishment. I'm more of a talker – I don't like to punish; I don't spank, hardly ever. I'm more of a talk to them/problem solver. It's more "what can we do about this?"

Mary talked about her efforts to be flexible, giving a punishment that could be lifted if good efforts take place. When her daughter came home with lower grades than she had previously been earning, Mary said, *"She wasn't applying herself. So I put her on restriction for three weeks, and told her if she brought her grades, up, she'd be off restriction. If not, then she'd stay on restriction for the whole six weeks"* This action allowed Mary to give her daughter a chance to improve in a short time frame, setting a reasonable goal for her daughter's improvement.

Expectations and Hopes.

In addition to rewarding positive progress and penalizing poor effort, parents supported learning through the expression of the hopes and expectations they had for their children. Every parent I interviewed expressed the hope that their children would continue their education at least through high school, and most hoped their children would go on to college.

Donna was the only parent who suggested she would be happy if her daughter just finished high school, although she added a hope for further education as our meeting progressed. Since Donna had only recently earned her own GED and was currently struggling to study to become a Certified Nursing Assistant, it was understandable that she would be happy to see her daughter

get to the same point eventually. Donna's hopes for her daughter included,

Right now, I just hope she makes it through 12th grade. It took me a long time to get that far. I just finished my GED recently, and then I took a Certified Nursing Assistant class, and I'm going on to nursing school. If she wants to, she can go to college or join the military. That's what I wanted to do. But it's her choice. She's excited that I'm going to be a nurse, so I told her maybe she can do that someday.

Another parent, Grace, used the word "hope" instead of "expect" when she spoke of her children's chances for college. *"Like any parent, I hope they'll want to go to college, but I don't put too many expectations on them about that. I do expect them to pay attention, to respect the teacher, to do their homework, though."*

Other parents were more expectant that their children would finish high school and go on to college. Mary was firm about what she expected of her children,

I tell my kids, "I don't care what you want to be when you grow up, but you will get an education. You can opt not to go to college, and that's fine, but I will prepare you to go to college and I prefer you to go. But I do want you to finish high school, and as long as you're living in this house, you will go to school. Education is important!"

Parents who had attended college themselves were more adamant about their expectations. Betty and her husband had come to the United States from Iraq, and although they were not working in their studied fields here, they insisted their children know what their parents expect of them:

They're going to college. Their father went to college, I went to college, and we expect them to go to college. It doesn't matter what college they want to go to or what they want to study about. That's their choice – they're the ones who have to live the life, so they can chose. But we do expect them to work hard and go to college. They know it and they want to.

As seen in Betty's quote, most parents understood that the ultimate decision about the future is not theirs to make, but they all spoke of using whatever influence they had to encourage further education. Many parents believed their children were capable of college, and they let them know that college was an expectation by talking to their children about the future. Hayley said, *"I expect them to go to college. I think they're really, really, intelligent and they'll want to do that for themselves, for jobs, for money...."* Ann also spoke of her children's' abilities, *"We expect both of our children to go to college. They both have that capability. We talked about it when they were younger, we'll talk about it in middle school, and all the way though high school."* Ann said she constantly reminded her children of her expectations that they will attend college and thought that helped them to absorb the idea.

One of the reasons parents supported education was so that their children would obtain things their parents did not have. Jenna, who dropped out of college to get married, said, *"I wish for my kids to be able to go to school and finish before they get married. To be able to finish school, have a good job, and then be able to start a family. We always want more for our kids."* Karen had similar

goals for her children,

I want my kids to go to college. I dropped out of school and had to go back to get my GED, and it was hard. Then I went back to college and got an associate's degree. I'm the first one in my family to go to college, and I want my kids to go too.

Parents also spoke about their willingness to help their children obtain their goals. Mary talked of her hopes for her children, *"I expect for my kids to go to college. I want them to go for the whole four years and get their degree. I tell them whatever goals they have, I'll help them with."* But even with the hopes and expectations that parents had about college, parents knew that they could not dictate what their children would do in the future. Olivia summed up an attitude of hopeful expectation tempered with caring acceptance that many of the parents alluded to:

I want them to get the most out of school that they possibly can. I hope they go to college, but I guess every parent hopes that. But I know college can be done; you just have to find ways to do it. I point that out to my kids, but I don't try to push them. I tell them to enjoy themselves because school will be over before you know it. They know I expect them to work hard, but they don't have to be perfect; they need to have fun too.

Learning is a Family Affair.

Parents were not the only family members who helped children to learn. Many parents spoke about the learning that takes place between siblings and about how children benefit from one another. Grace found that her younger

children really benefited from what the older siblings have learned, and that their willingness to help was a boon to a busy mother,

I don't always have a lot of time to do all that I'd like to do with them, but my older ones pick up the slack. They are great with the little ones. They'll help me with them; they'll sit down and read them a book, and when they write, the little ones want to write with them.

Olivia echoed Grace's thoughts about the learning that happened between siblings and the teaching role older siblings often took with their younger brothers and sisters, "*My two youngest have learned a lot from my oldest. So it's not just the parents who teach a child, but brothers and sisters too*", and Karen reiterated the family sub-category of education when she spoke of the help her son receives from his older sister, "*My son has slow motor skills and cognitive skills. So my daughter and I play games with him all the time, counting games, color games - to help him.*"

Hayley's status as a young, single mother necessitated family togetherness and created a learning situation that helped family members pass learning from one to another.

It's just me and them, so it's more like they're my peers, not my kids. What I learn, they learn, and what he learns, she learns. She's probably ahead of where she'd be if it weren't for him. He reads to her all the time.

Jenna's experience illustrated the beneficial learning that takes place between siblings; each one complements the other. In areas where one child is weak, the other helps to build, and vice versa.

My children help each other. He helps her follow the rules; he has the need to please and doesn't want his sister to get into trouble. My daughter's not like that; she's a free spirit. She gets him to have fun – they get on the ground and wrestle. And she's competitive; she keeps him on his toes.

Fran said that other children, in addition to siblings, sometimes helped with learning. Her friend's child knew Spanish and was teaching the other children to say some words in his language. *“My best friend's little boy is in preschool with my four-year old, and he's been teaching them all how to say the colors in Spanish.”*

These comments show that family involvement in education is not only about what children learn from parents, but what they learn from each other. Children often learn from their older siblings, cousins, and friends as well as from their parents and other adults.

Miscellaneous Support Activities.

By working hard to find ways to support learning, parents showed children the value that they placed on learning, and that they also valued their children. Showing children how important they are was another example of family involvement, and the importance of their children was a main reason why parents took the time to be involved. Ellie said, *“We have such beautiful, wonderful children; we see the potential in them and we don't want to lose that. That's why we work so hard with them.”* Lara talked about the difficulty of being a single parent, working and going to school to earn a GED and a better job,

I try my best and wish I could do better, but it's all I can do. I do what I got to do for my kids. When they fall back, I try to help them get back up. I help them with what they need help with, and try to tell them to just keep working.

These comments illustrate that being an involved parent is not always easy, but most parents think the result is worth the work. Fran said of her children, *"I love my kids and I don't want them to fail; I want them to succeed. I want them to be able to go to college and just do what they want when they grow up."* Mary summed up what many of the parents implied or mentioned about the difficulties of involvement being worth it in the long run.

Without my kids, I am nothing. They are my main prize. I think it's a parent's duty to be involved. You have to take the initiative to ask them if they did their homework and how things are going in school. It's not always easy, but it's worth it.

One property that parents cited when listing family involvement was attending events. Although many parents were unable to be physically present at school as frequently as teachers might hope for, they spoke of the efforts they make to be present when needed or when their children are involved in school activities. Working parents and parents who have more children find it more difficult to be present at school, but will make arrangements to be there when they need to be. Olivia, a working mother, spoke about her attendance at school programs,

I try and go when they invite parents, like mother's morning muffins and

that type of thing. If they have parties, I try to figure out when I can be there and get off from work. I go to lunch once in a while, and I go to teacher conferences.

Parents tried to attend school functions as often as they could, although other areas of their lives sometimes took precedence. However, when their children needed them there, they found ways to get to school. Mary spoke of being limited as to what she could attend because of her work schedule, but firmly told me that when she needs to be at the school for her children, she will definitely be there. *“Sometimes it’s not always optional for me to go if it’s during my work hours, but I let them know that I will be there when I am needed. I give them my number and ask them to call me.”* Naomi echoed that determination of need when she said, *“I’m kind of limited because I work. Most of their programs and stuff are during the day. If I can get away for a little while for something, I will. If he’s involved in something, I will get there.”*

Work schedules were not the only areas that created obstacles for parents who wanted to be able to visit schools more often. Having other children at home limited the amount of time parents could spend at school, as Fran noted in her comment, *“I would like to get involved in the PTA meetings, but with five kids and working, it’s hard to get involved in school functions. But I get off to go to teacher conferences.”* Parents’ own school schedules would also dictate whether they could attend school functions, *“I’m not able to get to the PTA meeting because of my school schedule, but I go to parent nights and open houses.”* Lack of transportation sometimes limited involvement in school activities, as Karen

reported, "My volunteering has slacked off this year because I haven't had a vehicle, so I have to keep in touch by telephone." However, as the previous statements show, parents found a way to deal with barriers when an event or conference affected their children.

Attendance at events and seeking to know what is going on were not limited to the school building, though; many parents spoke of attending sports events, dances, church, and community events with their children, all a part of family involvement. Charles noted his wife's knowledge about what happens at the after-school program their son attends, *"My wife gets involved with the Boys and Girls club where he goes after school. She knows everyone there, and they know her."* Several parents mentioned church communities that they attend as a family, and Ellie told me about some of the programs she and her husband attend with their children,

We go to every open house. And any little special thing, I always try to make a point, school programs, and extracurricular activities, G plays basketball, J is a cheerleader and on track. Anything they ask to do, we try to encourage them by being there.

The data show that parents feel it is their duty to be involved in what their children are doing in the home, in the school, and in the community.

Another way in which parents supported learning was through homework supervision, which was one of the first items mentioned when parents thought about what they do to be involved in their children's education. Making sure that children complete the assignments they've been given in school was one of the

most visible signs of educational support. Sometimes that meant helping children with the physical completion of the work, but more often it meant being aware of what has been assigned to children and making sure children understand that they are expected to do the work. Hayley knew she needed to be vigilant about checking her daughter's homework, *"I need to look over her homework to be sure she's done it all."* In addition, sometimes Hayley's daughter did not bring home necessary books to complete homework, and she would set new rules in place to address the issue, *"If she doesn't bring her homework and books home, her Daddy will march her right back to school to get them. So she might as well bring them home the first time."* Hayley and her husband took action to support their daughter's learning. Jenna and her husband have established a routine about when and where homework needs to be done, *"My husband is real big on a separate homework place, not in front of the TV. Homework gets done first. When he comes home on Friday, homework gets done then, rather than wait until Sunday night."*

Finding strategies that helped their children build strengths and strengthen weaknesses is another area in which parents support learning. Parents sometimes found creative ways to help their children. Ann enrolled her daughter in a dance class at school to help her with her shyness. Speaking about the dance class, Ann said,

We get her involved in things like that because she has a little fear of being in front of people. Last year she was in the spelling bee and this year it's dance class, and now she's thinking about the school talent

show. As a result, I see more confidence in her. For her to even consider being in a talent show is a huge step, a very big step.

This was also the case when Donna enrolled her daughter in Tae Kwan Do classes. Having taken Tae Kwan Do herself, Donna knew that the program helped develop self-discipline, as well as inner and outer strength. Because her daughter was *“not listening to the teacher, disrespecting classmates, and acting up in the cafeteria”*, Donna decided to try her daughter in the program. Donna said that the instructors *“told her if she didn’t behave or didn’t study or didn’t do what she was supposed to do in Tae Kwan Do classes, she would have to sit on the sidelines and watch instead of working out; that made her want to be good.”* Donna went on to tell me her daughter’s behavior in school improved too, *“It carried over to school because she’s been good ever since. She’s been getting perfect scores on her folder.”* The data show that finding ways to build strengths and strengthen weaknesses is a key part of family involvement.

School/Home Crossover.

Donna’s comment about “carrying over” leads to the next area of learning support. Parents believed that what happened at home crossed over to school and what happened at school also came home; the boundaries between different areas of a child’s life were permeable. Several parents cited examples of this belief. Hayley said, *“I think a lot of it connects. They can’t stop everything when they get to school, and they can’t stop when they get home. It crosses over.”* Parents spoke of the need to teach their children to behave at home the way they want them to behave in school. As Ann commented, *“The things we do at home*

cross over to school. My son had never lost a point behavior wise. I think he has more respect than a lot of children who have been in daycare. That's a big difference that carries over into school.

In addition to behavior, what children learned at home from parents often helps them to understand what they are learning in school and to connect school with the real world. Naomi thinks, *"The more well-rounded they are and the more exposure they have to a lot of different things, it helps them in school."* Olivia tries to turn everyday experiences into learning opportunities, *"I try to make learning fun. I might ask them how many plates are on the table or can you count the buildings on the left side of the street?"* Helping children to connect home and school is a way to help children see that learning is used in every part of life. As Ann said, *"We want to be involved both in home and school as much as we can, because it all carries over into the home. You want to know what's going on and how they'll behave when you're not there and to see how important learning is."*

All of the above quotes were grounded in the interview data, showing that parents let their children know that they support learning. They do that through communication, knowing what's going on in their lives, and being emotionally, psychologically, and physically present for them. By supporting learning, parents are also providing a climate for success, leading to the third sub-category of family involvement; ensuring children's success and growth.

Ensuring Children's Success and Growth

A third sub-category of what parents do to be involved is helping children grow and be successful in life. Two properties of this sub-category are keeping

children safe and teaching responsibility. Helping their children to grow and succeed are basic goals of parenting. Because so many parents mentioned these areas as important examples of how they view family involvement, I included keeping children safe and teaching them responsibility as properties of what parents do to ensure children's success and growth.

Keeping Children Safe.

Keeping children safe is a hallmark of good parenting, and was, in parents' minds, a vital part of being an involved parent. Several parents spoke about their reluctance, and sometimes outright refusal, to allow their children to play in their own neighborhoods. They also spoke of limiting their children's association with others who might influence their children negatively. Hayley said,

We don't associate much with the neighbors. I don't like my kids playing out in front on the other side of the building by themselves. So I make them stay in the house a lot, and we find stuff to do in here. We've painted the furniture; they've helped me paint it, and I keep them busy.

Like Hayley, other parents mentioned what they did as a substitution for playing outside. Fran made sure her children got fresh air and exercise, but she did it in a different neighborhood. *"I rarely let them go outside and play anymore because the kids around here get into trouble and get put into jail. So I just take them to the park or someplace where I can be with them."* Ida echoed Fran's statement when she spoke of keeping her kids safe in their own space. *"I don't let the kids play outside. The kids around here fight. So I take them to another park or I keep*

them inside. We have fun together – we're our own little world. I think it's safer."

Besides keeping children safe from tough neighborhood activity, parents tried to separate children from other children who might be bad influences. Mary spoke of limiting the kind of things her children are exposed to and of their reaction to her intervention,

They hardly ever go out, and they sometimes have a problem with that. I try to keep them ... my daughter goes to Boys and Girls Club after school, and that's enough socialization, that exposes her enough. Too much activity with others can lead to drama, and I don't want that. I'm trying to contain what they're doing and what they're exposed to.

Mary's comment illustrated her concern about what might happen if her daughter has too much exposure to peers who do not have the same upbringing her children have, but it also showed that she understood that the exposure is inevitable. Therefore, Mary saw limiting exposure to poor influences as part of family involvement. In a similar vein, Karen commented about the lack of involvement she saw from other parents, and told me how her actions differ from those parents.

I keep my kids in the house most of the time. That's how I manage. I don't let them run around out there like some of the other parents do. We've got six and seven year old kids running around three blocks from their home and their parents not knowing exactly where they're at. I tell my kids they have to stay in the front yard where I can keep an eye on them. That way they don't associate with people I don't want them to be around. Learning

things I don't want them to learn.

Mary's comments compare her actions with those parents who were not doing their job, showing that she, too, saw safeguarding her children as one of the ways in which parents show their involvement with their children. Other parents talked about how they provided socialization for their children. Karen's church community provided a safe place for her children to meet with other children, "*We associate more with my church family. The kids are in another school, but we all get together at church, or for picnics, or we go to the park together.*" Fran's friendship with another mother provided their children the companionship they needed, and kept them away from children they considered to be bad influences.

My best friend lives in the next apartment complex and we try to take the kids out when we're not too tired from work. We try to keep them away from the kids who are a bad influence or they'll start to act up in school.

Not every parent felt the need to go to such lengths to protect their children. A few parents were comfortable with their children playing outdoors in their neighborhoods. Olivia lives in the same neighborhood as her sister, and said, "*Our children get to go out and play with each other, and they interact with the other kids in the neighborhood. Our neighborhood is safe.*" Naomi's concerns about her neighborhood were different than many of the other parents, "There are dogs next door that worry me, and I worry about traffic too." Her worries were more about dog bites and speeding cars than about poor influences on her child.

Because I interviewed most of the parents in their own houses, I saw the

neighborhoods in which they resided. Many of the parents I interviewed lived in apartment complexes that were government-subsidized. All of the parents who spoke of their concerns about their children playing in the neighborhood lived in one of the subsidized housing apartments. Therefore, parents who lived in subsidized housing were more likely to have additional concerns about safeguarding their children, which they verbalized as family involvement.

Teaching Responsibility.

Many parents mentioned their efforts to teach their children to take responsibility for their actions. Ann spoke of her middle school son, saying *“He’s not a baby now and he’s expected to do things without being told all of the time.”* Ellie talked about expecting more of her daughter now that she’s in middle school, *“I know what she can do, and she’s growing up now and the old excuses don’t work anymore.”*

Sometimes parents worked on responsibility in teamwork with a child's teacher, as Ann did when her son was not bringing home what he was supposed to be bringing home. Ann said,

The teacher let me know he’s very smart but that he wasn’t bringing his books and notes home, and that he needed to do it without her reminding him. And I agreed that she wasn’t his babysitter, and that she should do what she needed to do on her end, and we would do what we needed to do on our end, and we’d meet in the middle.”

Ann and her husband worked with their son’s teacher to help him to learn to take responsibility for himself. Charles also addressed the need for children to learn to

be responsible,

He's at an age now where he has to learn to make his own decisions, and I've allowed him to do that on occasion. He's got to learn that he's going to make mistakes along the way. Right now, it's like a child and parent – he makes mistakes and I'm there to pick him up. But it won't always be that way, and he has to learn. I have to let him bump his head a bit.

Interestingly, every parent who spoke about teaching his or her children to take responsibility was speaking about a middle or high school child, not a young child. This may point out that parents understand that there is a time when each lesson is best introduced, and that family involvement may change as their children mature. Children will still need parents to be involved, but perhaps in different ways.

How Parents Learn What to Do

The purpose of this study was not to delve into the reasons parents give for being involved in their children's education, but to find out what they perceive parent involvement is. However, parents often spoke about how they learned to be involved and how they find out what they need to know to help their children. This led me to an understanding that parents had to learn what to do to help their children succeed in school and in life. Therefore, "*How Parents Learn What to Do*" became the second category of family involvement, with *learning from example, from experience, from society, and from school personnel* as properties.

Learning by Example.

Examples that participants had from their own parents colored their views about what an involved parent should do and often showed how they learned to be involved in their children's education. Participants were surprisingly frank about their own parents. When participants had parents who were very involved in their educational endeavors, they learned by example. Fran's mother and grandmother were both involved in school, and Fran wants the same thing for her children,

My mother and grandmother were always pushing us to do our homework and to be at school every day. Me and my sister, we loved school; we loved our work and we loved getting involved in school and everything, and that's what I want my kids to do.

Jenna commented that both she and her sister are "stay-at-home moms" because that was the example they learned from their own mother.

My mom was involved in school, and my dad was involved on the ball field; he coached our ball teams. He also went on field trips once a year. My mom was a chairperson of the PTA and carnival administrator; she was a stay at home mom and so she was able to do that. That's why my sister and I are stay at home moms - so we can do those things for our kids too.

Other parents spoke of missing that kind of involvement, and vowed that they would do better for their own children. However, even when their own parents were not as involved as they would have liked them to be, most

participants were accepting of their parents' lack of involvement. For example, Ellie said,

My mama had a lot of problems, and she was kind of wrapped up in her own self at the time; she had a lot going on. I think that's why I made it such a point to be so involved in my kids' life. I think it would have made such a difference in my own life if my mama had pushed me more. I would have done better. That's why I push my kids to do better. I know my mama did the best she could at the time, but I know I can do better.

And though they may have said that they have forgiven and understood their parents for their lack of involvement, parents were also determined not to follow in their footsteps, as illustrated by Grace.

My mom and dad were divorced when I was three, so I never really knew my mom. My dad raised us, and there were four of us, so he had a lot on his plate. I was real athletic; I played first string in all the sports, but my dad never attended a game. He didn't even take me to the games; I had to ride my bike. But I think parents should be more involved. You're supposed to have that - that's a parent's duty...that's a connection between a child and parent.

Therefore, when parents saw their own parents being involved, they learned by example. If their own parents were not involved, they had to rely on society - schools and other parents - to learn what they "should" be doing.

Parents' purposes for being involved relate to their children and what they want them to achieve in life. Parents are adult learners, and they have adult

reasons for learning, such as the need to know why they need to learn something; the need to learn experientially; the need for a problem-solving learning approach, and the need for immediate value for their learning. These areas are highlighted by the examples parents gave about learning to be involved in their children's educational endeavors.

Adults hope that their children will benefit from their involvement. As Charles commented, "*It's miraculous to me that when I encourage my son to do good in school, he goes to school and does good and comes back to me with good results. My encouragement is important.*" Therefore, parents are willing to learn what to do to be involved because the learning has a benefit and purpose.

Parents also learned the importance of involvement from their own experiences in school and life. When they had good experiences, they often emulated the models who provided those experiences; when they have had poor experiences, they took steps to ensure that their children will not have similar bad experiences. Ellis spoke about her husbands' resolve to be a good father.

Because he didn't really have a daddy, it made him determined his kids were going to have a good daddy. I think that both of us, we really didn't want to be like our parents. We forgive them for everything they did, but we don't want that.

Parents were ready to learn the developmental tasks dictated by their roles; they were solving problems for their children. As children entered school, parents began to search for ways to help their children learn. When they saw that their involvement was helpful to their children, parents became self-directed in

learning ways in which they can help their children succeed. Parents wanted some help from their children's teachers; sometimes they wanted teachers to teach them how to help their children, as shown in Mary's statement,

I help my child in whatever I can, and I may not know all of the curriculum, but if there is something I don't know, I will ask the teacher to explain it to me so I can explain it to my child.

Learning from Experience.

Parents sometimes learn through the trial-and-error of experience. When one way doesn't work, they try another. Ann spoke about helping her daughter with math, *"I was trying to show her the steps the way the teacher did it, and she just couldn't grasp it. So I asked my husband to show us an easier way."*

Parents learn through day to day experiences. Lara, a single mother whose native language is Spanish, uses her experiences to help her learn English.

I'm learning English from looking at books and looking words up. I listen to my friends speak. They say I don't speak very well, but I try everything, and I think I do pretty well. I go to school every day, and with that and reading books and listening to people speak, I learn.

Parents also learn about their children through their day to day experiences. For example, Grace mentioned the need for parents to learn about their children as individuals,

My daughters do very well in school, but my little boy has some difficulty; he seems to have a speech problem. I've sent the papers off to the county

to have him evaluated. He's not potty trained yet, even though he's 4, but they say that goes along with his speech development. Now my 2-year old is as smart as a whip, she's already potty-trained. So you just have to learn about them and go along with whatever they are. They're all just little individuals.

In addition to day to day experience, parents also learn from their own earlier experiences in life. Charles spoke about the difficulty of learning about the value of hard work, both for his children and for himself,

It just might take some time. For them to really knuckle down and say this is what I want to do, the right way, step by step, day by day. It's like, me, I took time, for a long time I didn't think I had to really go out there every day and work like I do. I cut corners, but I learned, especially after my son came, you got to have something there that's for real, something you're not going to be worried about.

Parents learn from their own experiences. As in all experiences, sometimes the experiences are good, and parents will repeat their actions to get similar results. However, sometimes the experiences are not as welcome, and parents learn different ways to help their children grow and succeed.

Learning from Society.

The first influence on parents' decisions to become involved in their children's education is the culture of the community in which they live – whether involvement is an expected role for parents in a particular family, school, or social community. Parents cannot always articulate why they are involved in their

children's education, but they assume they are supposed to be involved – it is a matter of duty. As Grace stated, *“I think parents should be more involved. You're supposed to have that - that's a parent's duty...that's a connection between a child and parent.”* Ann echoed Grace's feeling that parents should be involved, *“I just hate that there's not as much involvement as there could be. Many parents just cannot be here, but the ones that can, I think they should. It's important.”*

Parents learn from other parents, sometimes even from their own spouses. Jenna spoke about her husband's efforts to learn how to discipline their children,

He didn't have a good example; his Daddy had a temper. So he pretty much takes my lead on discipline. Every once in a while he sees something coming out and he says, “I'll just have to work on it.” He knows it's something he'll have to continue to work on to change and be better.”

Parents can also learn from other children's parents. Ann said, *“The set of parents that I work with in the PTO, they have such phenomenal ideas, and I just sit back and listen to them because I think their ideas are so great.”* Even when communication between parents is not sought, it is sometimes offered. Betty said she is not afraid of saying things to parents that she thinks need to be said. She told the mother of her daughter's friend, *“your daughter is worried and is uncomfortable about something that is going on at home, and you need to pay attention.”* Similarly, Mary defends teachers to her friends, *“It's not always the teacher's fault. You have to take the initiative to ask your child what he's supposed to be doing.”* Knowledge is not always sought or wanted, but it

happens anyway, and hopefully, parents learn from their shared knowledge.

Parents also learn from other members of the community. When Donna was having difficulty encouraging her daughter to behave in school, she sought help from her Tai Quan Do instructors. Donna said, “For a while she was being bad in school, and I had them talk to her. They sat her down and talked to her, and since then she’s really straightened out a lot.” Donna told me she learned from the instructors that being involved in Tai Quan Do helps her daughter to have more self-control in school.

Learning from School Personnel.

Parents depend on teachers to learn ways to help their children. Ellie talked about meeting with teachers to find new ways to help her daughter, “*She’s always had a couple of bad grades, unfortunately. Every time we go to talk to her teachers, they give us some new ideas to try.*” Fran also looked to her daughter’s teacher for help with her child’s progress, “He has good grades, but his behavior – sometimes he gets sidetracked. I don’t know if he’s bored, if he needs more, or what. I’m going to see his teacher to get some ideas about how to help him.”

Grace went to the principal when she was concerned about her child,

We were worried that one of our children had a hearing problem, she wasn’t hearing out of one ear, so I talked to the teacher and principal. It turned out it was just some kind of middle ear infection, but it made me more comfortable talking to them about it.

Parents learn about a variety of topics from school personnel, including school work, behavior, child development, and health issues. Parents would sometimes

like their children's teachers to teach and support them, in addition to teaching their children, as illustrated by Mary,

I help my child in whatever I can, and I may not know all of the curriculum, but if there is something I don't know, I will ask the teacher to explain it to me so I can explain it to my child.

Ann respects teachers' knowledge and opinions and trusts them to help her deal with her son. *"I want them to be able to say anything they need to say to me to help him."* Ellie spoke of understanding that teachers in higher grades have more children to teach, but said,

I know they deal with a lot of kids every day, but they spend a lot of time with your kids, and they see their strengths and their weaknesses. And I think it would be good to let parents know that their kids are doing this and this and this...good and bad, but especially when your kids are doing bad. Hey, call me on the phone. I'd like to know.

Parents also wanted to learn strategies that would help them immediately, not things that might help them at some far-away time. When programs were offered at school or information was sent home about strategies that might help children, parents scanned the information to see if it held value for them. Parents were willing to make time for what their children presently needed, but not for "some day in the future knowledge" that might never be necessary. As Ann said,

If my daughter has trouble with her work, I'll write a note to her teacher or I'll walk in with her and say, "She's having trouble with this, is there another way that I can help her to move along with this"?

When their children were involved in programs or when the information seemed to be beneficial to their children, parents were more likely to participate. Hayley talked about all of the information that came home from the school, *“The school sends home little flyers on how to discipline them and things like that. Some of it might work for me, and some of it doesn’t. So I just read what might work.”* Lara echoed Hayley’s attention to reading items that apply to her children, *“They send things home and I read whatever has something to do with my kids and what is happening with them.”* Grace illuminated further the fact that parents will make time for programs that will benefit their children.

The school has a great CSR (Comprehensive School Reform) program. I’ve not been to it, but I’ve seen the notices, and I think it’s a great idea. If I felt like I needed the help, I’d attend them. But I just don’t have the time. That’s not really true; I could make the time if I had the need – if my children needed help. That’s the difference.

Parents also share information with teachers. For example, Ellie pointed out her daughter’s previous difficulties to a new teacher to inform her of possible problems, *“When she went to a new school this year, I asked the teachers to pull up her records to see what her progress had been and that there may be an issue.”*

In addition to sharing information with teachers about their children, sometimes parents provide feedback to teachers about how they are doing their job. Mary let school personnel know that she wasn’t happy about the assumptions they were making about her child,

I told them they shouldn't wait until the child is failing to let parents know. If you wait until my child fails, we may not be able to fix it and help him pass. Let me know as soon as the problem begins to occur. They told me they didn't know which parents want them to call and which parents don't. But I told them they shouldn't assume; they should just take the chance and call."

Parents also let teachers know when they are doing a good job. Miss M helps other teachers calm Karen's bi-polar daughter down when she is confronted with problems at school. Karen told Miss M., "*You've been a been a godsend to my child.*" Parents let teachers know when they are doing well and when they have room for improvement.

Parents and teachers learn from and support each other. As Ann summarized, "*If teachers and parents both know they are going to support and help each other, then you have great communication.*" Olivia echoed Ann's sentiment, "*The kids are in school a good part of the day and the teacher takes the place of the parents. So there has to be some trust between parents and teachers. It's the only way school will work.*"

Conclusion

Family Involvement has been reported as vital to children's success in school. Although many studies have heralded the need for family involvement, there is no single definition of what family involvement includes. This study provided a view of family involvement that is grounded in the experiences and perceptions of a group of 15 parents.

The study I conducted on parent perspectives of family involvement produced two major categories; the first category describes what parents do to be involved and their role as teacher/facilitator and the second illustrates their role as learner.

In review, the first category includes four major sub-categories and associated illuminating properties:

- a. **Communication**, which includes *Talking to teachers, children, and other parents*, and *Seeing*
- b. **Giving Children Reasons to Learn**, including *material goals* and *non-material goals*
- c. **Supporting Learning**, and the accompanying properties of *Celebrating Progress, Expectations and Hopes, Learning as a Family Affair, Miscellaneous Support Activities*, and *School/Home crossover*
- d. **Ensuring Children's Success and Growth**, with *Keeping Children Safe* and *Teaching Responsibility* as properties.

The second category of parent perspectives of family involvement described parents in the role of learner – how parents learned to be involved, and what they learned to do as involved parents. Many parents learned to be involved through the examples they were given by their own parents. Parents whose own parents were highly involved in their education were likely to continue that kind of involvement. Conversely, there were some parents who did not learn family involvement at the knee of their parents. In those cases, two paths emerged. One path took parents toward abundant involvement. In this path, parents

learned to be involved in spite of what they saw from their own parents; they made conscious decisions to be different from their parents. The second path still led to involvement, although not as strong or as frequent an amount of involvement. On this path, parents had not learned involvement from their uninvolved parents. However, because they were doing more than their parents had done, they saw themselves as involved. Every parent I spoke with saw himself or herself as an involved parent, even though they were at different levels of involvement.

If parents think they should be involved and already see themselves as being highly involved, how can school personnel encourage more involvement? The following chapter will discuss the implications of this study of family involvement and what the study might add to the field.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

When I began this study, I thought I would probably find that parents agreed with the publicly-held narrow definition of family involvement – volunteering at school and going to meetings. I also thought I would hear about the barriers that kept parents from being physically present at school. However, this study showed that volunteering and meetings make up just a small portion of family involvement and that parents think of themselves as involved at school even when their physical presence at school is infrequent.

The research question that guided this study was, *What do parents perceive family involvement in their children's education to be?* Based on the overall theme of my data analysis, parents perceive family involvement as doing whatever it takes – “anything and everything” – to push their children along the path of academic and life success. This includes teaching their children what to do and facilitating the learning that others provide. However, parents also have to learn before they can pass on their knowledge. This paradox requires parents to fill two roles, that of teacher/facilitator and that of learner. Therefore, the theory of parent involvement contains two areas; *what parents do* and *how they learn to do it*.

The first area, what parents do to be involved, is what I was looking for when I decided to research parent perspectives of family involvement. I wanted to find out what parents thought family involvement was, and what they did at

home and at school to support their children's education. My questions were addressed by the data analysis. Parents talked about what they did to help their children learn, about their own parents' involvement (or lack of involvement), and about how that affected their own decisions about involvement. They also spoke about learning how to help their children (see Figure 3 in the previous chapter, Family Involvement Theory). The theory included an overall theme (Parents Do Whatever it Takes to Help their Children to Grow and Succeed), two selective categories (What Parents Do and How They Learn To Do It), and related sub-categories and properties of parents' perceptions of family involvement. The previous chapter used parents' words to illustrate the related sub-categories of what parents do to be involved in their children's education; this chapter discusses the findings and implications of the study.

Findings from this grounded theory study expand the conceptual understanding of family involvement by adding the view of parents. My findings support those found by other researchers, but there are some findings which this study does not fully support. However, even when my study does not support other researchers' findings, it does not negate their findings, but instead shows that not all parents fit within the parameters and findings of every research study. Similarly, other researchers interviewing different groups of parents might find alternate answers to my research question.

Answering the Research Question

This study shows that parents see family involvement as doing whatever will help their children to succeed in school and in life. The data show a number

of areas in which parents are involved in their children's education, including *communication; giving children reasons to learn; supporting their learning; and ensuring children's growth and success*. Some of these areas are congruent with research conducted by family involvement researchers, and some are not. For example, Epstein & Dauber (1997) lists six areas of involvement: *parenting, communication, supporting learning at home, volunteering, decision-making, and community collaboration*. All of the parents in this study see the importance of the first three of these areas. Two of these areas, *communication and supporting learning*, are exact sub-categories of this study's theory of family involvement. Similarly, Epstein's area of parenting coincides with this study's sub-category, *Ensuring Child's Growth and Success*, and volunteering is included in the *Communication* property of "seeing what is going on." However, Epstein's steps of decision-making and community collaboration are beyond the routine aspects of family involvement according to the perceptions of the majority of parents in this study. Although a few parents took part in these additional areas, such as when one couple appeared before the school board to advocate for their child's school, most of what parents described as parent involvement was confined to Epstein's first four steps.

Ziil and Nord (1994) found that parental participation in schools wanes as the child's age increases. This study support those findings; parents said that teachers in middle and high school do not keep them informed or invite their participation as frequently as teachers in elementary schools did. Although parents understand that the increased number of children for whom teachers are

responsible in higher grades, they would like teachers to find ways to keep them informed.

Finally, Bandura (1977) found that individuals low in self-efficacy for a given activity behavior may be unable to cope with difficulties in that area, and Sue and Sue (1999) suggested that ethnic minorities, women, and impoverished individuals often have an external locus of control, believing that luck plays a higher role than ability in school success. Rich (1987, p. 105) wrote, "*Children in effective families know that it is not fate or genes or good looks that make the differences but old-fashioned hard work. They believe success will come from inner motivation and commitment to an achievement-oriented ('go-for-it') lifestyle*". Similarly, parents in this study did not appear to suffer from a lack of self-efficacy or external locus of control because of their limited education or negative experiences; in fact, their experiences seem to spur them on to take action on behalf of their children.

The study shows that the things parents do to be involved center on the well-being of their children, not the well-being of the school or the teachers. Parents do not attend school activities to please school personnel; they attend to help their children. They do the things they do in order to teach their children or to facilitate their learning by others.

Parents as Teachers and Facilitators

Many of the parents in this study spoke about the need for a particular activity or piece of literature to be relevant to their child. Parents have a limited amount of time and resources to accomplish the assortment of activities they

must complete each day in their role as parents. Maslow's (1954) theory of self-actualization and needs hierarchy emphasizes the various motivations people have for doing and learning; the importance people place on activity is influenced by their need for the activity. Cross and Zusman (1979) summarized major barriers to participation in learning activities for adults: lack of time; costs; scheduling problems; assorted institutional requirement/red tape; lack of information about appropriate opportunities; problems with child care or transportation; lack of confidence; and lack of interest. These barriers correspond to parent involvement. Almost all of these barriers were listed by at least one parent in this study as why they might not be involved in a particular activity. Therefore, participation in family involvement activities is influenced by the whether or not the parent will learn skills that will help their child.

The main theory of this study – that parents do whatever it takes – corresponds with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *Ecological Systems Theory*, in which he hypothesized that children are influenced by all of the people in the systems with which they come into contact. The data show that parents realize that there are many influences on their children's learning. Children learn at home; they learn at school, and they learn in the community. They learn from other children and they learn from television, radio, and print media.

The following illustration uses Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory (Figure 1) as a basis for showing how family involvement occurs in all areas of a child's, community, home, and school, expanding on Bronfenbrenner's theory with family involvement in children's education. Parents participate in all of these activities –

“anything and everything” - to help their children grow and succeed.

Figure 5 expands on Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, showing activities in which parents participate in order to help them grow and succeed. As Bronfenbrenner hypothesized, the areas of life that influence children are not isolated to what happens at home, but include what happens at school and in all of the communities in which a child lives and belongs.

Parents as Learners

The answer to the original research question of this study, what do parents perceive as family involvement to be, is that parents see family involvement to be doing whatever it takes to help their children grow and succeed. But how do parents know what to do? This question is answered by the second selective category found in this study and is an area of family involvement that has not been addressed in the literature.

Parents are not born with the ability to parent. Just as in any other occupation pursued in life, parenting is a learning process. There are many ways to learn a job; imitation of others, informal observation, formal education, and on-the-job training are among the most common learning methods. Parents are adult learners who are learning a job that has tremendously important implications for the children they are raising, the family as a whole, the community, and society in general. By thinking of parents as learners, teachers and administrators might find they are better equipped to help parents to assist their children.

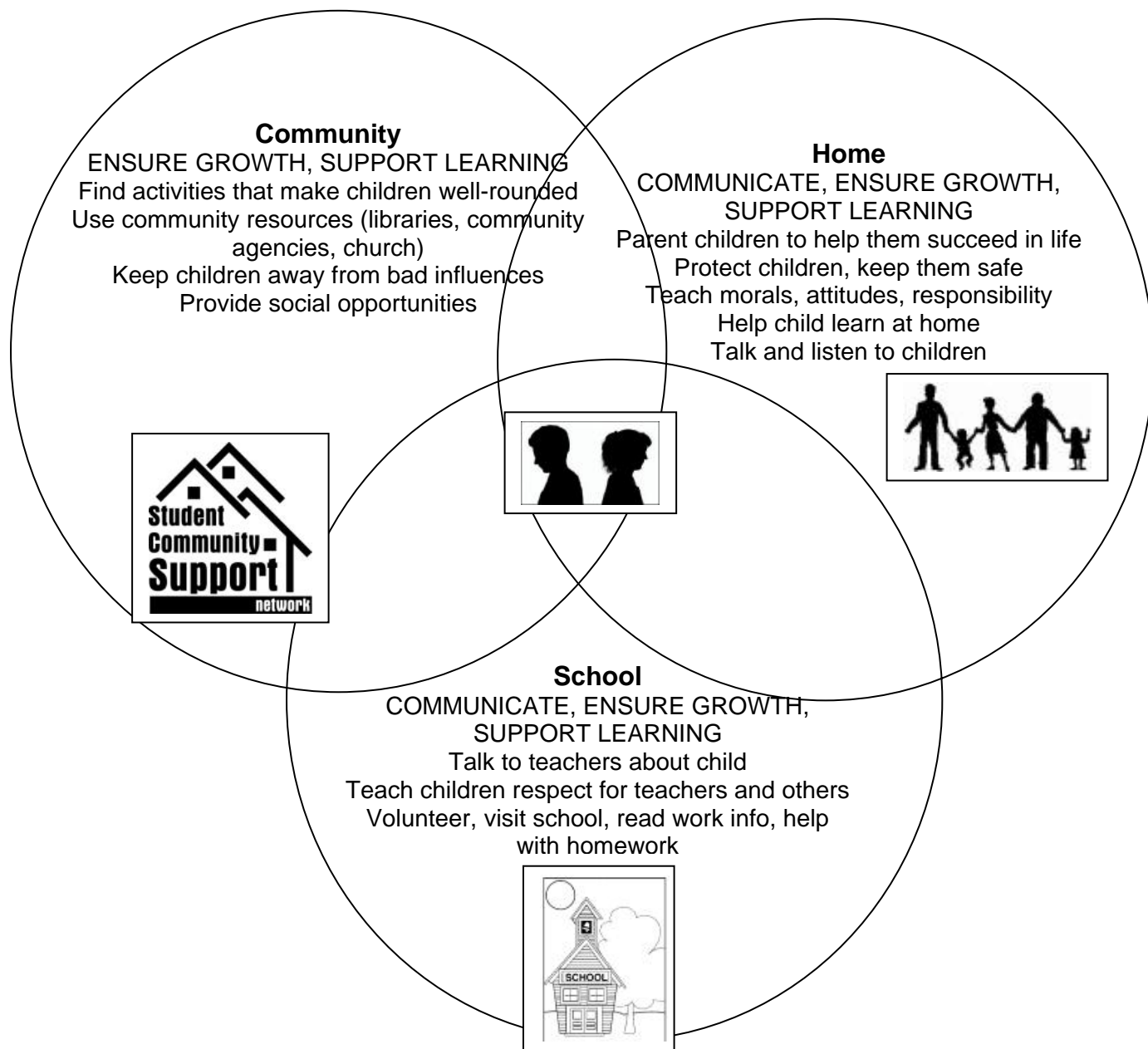


Figure 5. Connecting Family Involvement to Bronfenbrenner’s Theory

Knowles (1980) championed some crucial assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from assumptions about how children learn. Piaget's (1952) concept of the process of equilibrium asserts that in order to adapt to the constantly changing needs of their children, parents must adapt and continually learn. Illeris (2002) hypothesized that learning is made up of three distinct dimensions; cognitive, emotional, and social. Illeris's theory is one that is appropriate for parents, fitting the way in which parents learn so that they can support their children's learning. Cognitively, they learn skills that will help their children learn. Their emotions, feelings, attitudes and motivations are helping them to determine their need for the learning and to learn the needed skill. In addition, their learning is influenced by historical conditions (their own parents), societal conditions (teachers and other parents), and their own emotional conditions.

Learning by Example.

The data show that how one's parents treated school involvement impacts how involved an individual becomes in his or her own child's school education.

"The way we see ourselves, others, and the world is shaped in the setting of our family of origin. The views we develop there stay with us throughout life."

(Richardson, 1995, p.1) According to Richardson, if our parents were involved parents, then we are more likely to define our own roles in a similar way, and if our parents had a "hands-off" approach to school, leaving education solely to school staff, then we may lean toward being less active in our children's education. However, the data from my study show that parent examples do not

always follow the expected path. Parent examples of involvement had three outcomes. When parents had parents who were involved in their education, they usually became involved parents. Conversely, when parents had parents who were not involved in their education, there were two paths parent could take; they might be involved in spite of their parents' lack of involvement because they didn't want their children to do without, or they might be minimally involved but think they are amply involved in comparison to their parent's lack of involvement. Therefore, some families learned *because of* their parents and some learned *in spite of* their parents.

Learning through Experience.

Parents don't ask themselves each day, "What do I need to learn today?" Many of the things parents learn are learned implicitly. Implicit learning relates to the discoveries that learners make about themselves and the world through their experiences and interaction with others. These discoveries may be made unconsciously and are an informal kind of learning. Illeris (2002, p. 178) wrote about everyday learning as "learning which occurs informally and apparently by chance in everyday life." Illeris continued to give a description of everyday learning that appropriately fits parental learning, "In everyday learning one comes across a flood of impulses and impressions, and acquires ways of selecting, relating, and navigating among them in the confusion of life in order to get through the day" (p.178). Candy (1991, p.172, wrote that "adults do not sit down and plan exactly what they want and where and when they are going to learn. Rather, the process is more haphazard and is often a series of trial-and-error

occurrences". Marsick and Volpe (1999) identified characteristics of incidental learning that include "integration with daily routines", and "links to the learning of others", describing some of the learning that takes place with parents. Taylor (2001) found that habits, attitudes and preferences emerge from implicit learning, and that this type of learning is shaped by former events, becoming part of our being and influencing our behavior. In other words, parents implicitly learn without conscious effort, and that learning influences their actions.

Learning implicitly is connected to learning experientially. Kolb's (1984) model illustrates experiential learning. The process begins with an experience, followed by a reflection of the experience. The reflection is assimilated into a theory or concept, and the new hypothesis is tested in a new situation. This model of experiential learning would explain much of what happens with parents and children in learning situations: parents experience a situation, they take action, they reflect on whether the action produces the desired result, and they come up with a theory about the experience and action. They then repeat the action if they had a good result or discard it if the action did not produce the desired result. Therefore, much of what parents learn is through their experiences, and requires the immediacy of on-the-job learning.

The data show that parents are willing to learn what to do to be involved because the learning has a benefit and purpose. One theory that elaborates on the reasons parents have for learning was a study conducted by Stein (1995) that identified the four purposes of learning. This study was part of the foundation for the Equipped for the Future (EFF) initiative, a program funded by the National

Institute for Literacy. The four purposes for learning identified in the research were:

- a. Access - gaining access to information and resources
- b. Voice - expressing ideas and opinions with the confidence they will be heard and taken into account
- c. Action - solving problems and making decisions
- d. Bridge to the future - learning to learn in order to be prepared to keep up with the world as it. These are all purposes that fit parents' motives for learning to be involved in their children's' education

Table 6 illustrates how the study findings correspond with the EFF purposes for learning.

The main reasons parents gave for being involved concerned their children. Levinson's (1986) theory of life development stages defines early adulthood, the stage that runs from approximately age seventeen to forty-five,

Table 6. EFF Purposes for Learning Applied to Family Involvement

Access to Information	Voice	Action	Bridge to Future
Communicate with teachers about child's strengths and weaknesses	Share info about child with teachers	Find ways to strengthen weaknesses and build strengths	Give child reasons to learn: personal fulfillment, knowledge, ability to fulfill needs and desires
Find out about community programs that will benefit child	Ask for whatever will help the child	Celebrate their progress, work with child on lack of progress	Teach responsibility – financial, personal (moral)
Communicate with child about fears, likes, dislikes	Advocate for child	Keeping child safe	Helping child plan for future

which includes most parents raising children, as the era of “greatest energy and abundance and of greatest contradiction and stress...we are most buffeted by our passions and ambitions from within and by the demands of family, community, and society from without.” These demands create new learning needs, and experiential learning is one of the ways in which parents learn.

Learning from Society.

Another way in which parents learn is by seeing and hearing what other people in society are doing, and using that as a basis for learning what they are “supposed” to do. Mezirow (1991, p. 1, 12, and 18) found that a person’s frame of reference is an emotional sub-category of learning. “What we perceive and fail to perceive and what we think and fail to think are powerfully influenced by habits of expectation that constitute our frame of reference, that is, a set of assumptions that structure the way we interpret our experiences.” Similarly, Brookfield (1990, p. 178) described a person’s assumptions as

the seemingly self-evident rules about reality that we use to help us seek explanations, make judgments, or decide on various actions...People cannot reach adulthood without bringing with them frameworks of understanding and sets of assumptions that undergird their decisions, judgments, and actions.

These assumptions and habits of expectation guide our emotions about the learning we experience, helping us to make decisions about the importance and relevance of the learning in our lives. We place greater importance on learning that which is relevant and important to us. My research corroborated

Mazlow's and Brookfield's' theories about habits and expectations: parents learn from their parents and from society about what they are they are supposed to be doing to help their children succeed in school.

Some of the people parents learn from are other parents. Several parents in this study mentioned learning from other parents, and others mentioned talking to other parents to offer advice. Strasz (2006) calls this a type of mentoring, sharing "over-the-fence" contacts that happen in non-professional or informal networks. This informal type of parent mentoring helps parents support and learn from each other.

Learning from Teachers.

Teachers and parents also act as mentors to each other, and both parties can benefit from the learning that takes place in parent-teacher relationships. Daloz (1999) challenges teachers to promote development in their mentoring relationships with parents by challenging them to examine their concepts of self and world and to develop new perspectives. Daloz uses the metaphor of a journey to describe the learning adults undertake, and the teacher is a guide for the journey. Therefore, teachers can help parents traverse the journey of parenting by guiding them through the new areas they are visiting. Parents receive information, ideas, challenges, support, and direction from teachers. However, parents are not the only people who benefit from building relationships with parents. Teachers receive feedback from parents about whether their teaching skills are having an effect on children and whether they are establishing effective relationships with children and parents; this feedback helps teachers

improve their teaching and communication skills.

The data show that parents want a connection with teachers that goes beyond the expected role of teacher to child. Parents who are interested in going beyond the segmented teacher and parent roles use their children's teachers as facilitators of their own learning. Illeris (2002, p. 221) wrote about adult learners, "When participants realize that they can take responsibility and use the teacher as a support for their own learning, learning becomes voluntary." Although Illeris was probably referring to teachers of adults, this statement also appears to apply to how parents relate to their children's teachers.

Parents expect teachers to help them learn in areas that will help their child. Several parents mentioned their expectations that teachers would help them learn how to assist their children in educational issues, but they also mentioned needing help to learn about discipline, child development at various stages, and about their children's strengths and weaknesses. Illeris (2002, p. 219) extended his statement about learning from teachers, "It is basically characteristic that adults learn what they want, and they have very little inclination to acquire something they do not want, i.e., something they do not perceive as meaningful." Parents in this study often reiterated this admonition; they were not interested in making efforts to attend parent nights about issues that offer nothing of interest to them.

Recognition of Additional Consideration to Field of Urban Education

An area that has not been addressed in family involvement literature is the lengths to which parents go to ensure their children's safety. The findings about

safety led me to investigate the phenomenon of keeping children in a separate world away from those who may negatively influence them. Jarrett & Jefferson's (2004) article, *Women's Danger Management Strategies in an Inner-City Housing Project*, pointed out the connection between my participants and those in the article. Parents told me about their efforts to keep their kids safe by keeping them inside the house. Two frequent strategies parents used were monitoring (being aware of where children are) and confining (restricting children to the house). Jarrett (1997) called confining "cloistering", and identifies it as a major strategy that women use to keep their children safe, a child-monitoring strategy that "reflects parental efforts to limit their children's exposure to larger neighborhood influences". Rainwater (1970) called the strategy "lock-up", and wrote that "while physical lock-up is impractical at all times and becomes increasingly more difficult as children leave the family circle, (e.g. to attend school), it is somewhat feasible for very young children who have few social contacts outside of the household." Researchers have found that parents sometimes discourage their children from playing with "bad" peers (Jeffers, 1969) and that parents often create their own play groups consisting of "desirable" children (Tatje, 1974). Parents in my study spoke of creating social networks with friends and church communities. Parents go to great lengths and devote a great deal of time and energy providing their children with safe opportunities for social and educational growth. This area should be addressed in further research studies.

Contribution to the Field of Adult Education

This study contributes to the theory of parent involvement but also makes an important contribution to the field of adult education. Adult education is concerned with adult learners in many settings. The majority of adults are parents, parents who are learning to be involved in their children's education, requiring a monumental adjustment for educators, who are accustomed to thinking of children as learners, but not of their parents as learners too. Parents are continually learning new things to help their children learn, and parents must cope with basic needs like food, shelter, and safety before they can worry about helping their children learn to succeed in school.

This study has implications for the field of adult education in that it adds a whole new population to seekers of adult learning – parents. Teachers often do not have experience working with adult learners. Dorothy Rich (1987, p. 23) wrote in *Teachers and Parents: An Adult to Adult Approach*, “teachers tend to be ‘teacherish’. This is a useful attribute for work with children, but it can be ruinous in the parent-teacher relationship”. Teachers would benefit from an overview of characteristics of adult learners. Parents’ learning how to be involved in children’s education fits within the Malcolm Knowles’ principles of andragogy in the following ways:

- a. Adults know that their children will benefit from their involvement.
- b. Parents learned the importance of involvement from their own experiences in school and life. When they have good experiences, they often emulate the models who provided those experiences; when they have had poor

experiences, they take steps to ensure that their children will not have similar bad experiences.

c. Andragogy ties the relationship of adults' readiness to learn to the developmental tasks dictated by their roles; they are solving problems for their children. As children enter school, parents begin to search for ways to help children learn. When they see that their involvement is helpful to their children, parents are ready to learn ways to help their children succeed.

d. Parents also want to learn strategies that will help them now, not things that might help them at some far-away time. When programs are offered at school or information is sent home about strategies that might help children, parents scan the information to see if it has value to them.

e. Parents are willing to make time for what their children presently need, but not for "some day in the future knowledge" that might never be necessary. When their children are involved in programs or when the information will benefit their children, parents are more likely to participate.

Parents are pragmatic learners who are willing to learn about techniques and strategies that will help them be better parents and produce successful, happy children. Family involvement is a classic adult learning experience, and researchers should consider using this area as an additional area of study in adult learning and development. The data illustrated that parents are eager to learn how to be productively involved in their children's education and adult educators could help teachers learn to more effectively work with parents in the learning process. Teachers are accustomed to seeing learning as something

they do for children, and they may inadvertently be treating parents in the same way they treat children. Adults have different ways of learning and different reasons for learning than their children have, and teachers would benefit from learning about adult learning concepts. Therefore, family involvement - helping teachers learn how to effectively work with and support parents - opens up a new area of application for adult educators.

This study expanded the literature on both family involvement and adult education by showing the paradoxical roles parents play – that of teacher and learner. Parents might not know what to do to help their children, but most are willing to learn. Parents most often do what they think is best but do not always have access to new ideas or information.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

This study provides recommendations for policy and practice in two areas: a) teacher preparation programs and b) elementary, middle, and high schools. Teacher preparation programs must prepare teachers to work with parents before they even enter the classroom, and schools must work with teachers to help them involve parents once they are in the classrooms.

Many teachers found that they were not prepared to work with parents when they entered the classroom. In the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher (2005, p. 14), “communicating with and engaging parents is the most frequently cited challenge among new teachers and the area they feel least prepared to take on in their first teaching position.” By adding classroom instruction through readings, role-plays, discussion, and visits from parents as requirements in

teaching preparation curriculum, teachers will be better prepared to work effectively with parents. Therefore, this study recommends that planners of curriculum in teacher preparation programs incorporate programs that help future teachers learn about working with parents.

Added to the lack of preparation in teacher preparation programs, teachers in classrooms are often apprehensive about working with parents. One teacher in Epstein and Becker's (1982) study said that teachers are more fearful of interaction than parents are. However, school personnel might find that a shift in thinking about parents could assist them to feel more comfortable working with parents. By seeing parents as learners, administrators and teachers could shift from their thinking from "parents don't want to be involved" to "parents might not understand what the school or teachers consider involvement to be." Instead of being seen as not caring because they are not present, parents can be supported to have the resources they need to learn their way into their role as teacher/facilitator.

Similarly, what school personnel think of as important may be different than what parents see as important. School personnel should not expect large numbers of parents for organizational PTA meetings that do not directly pertain to children. Rather than see lack of attendance as lack of interest, school personnel might see lack of attendance as not meeting the needs of parents. Teachers and administrators often lament the fact that when they offer parent nights, providing food and information, they have such low response. This study highlighted the areas that parents perceive as necessary to encourage their

participation. Because parents are busier than ever before, it would be beneficial for school administrators to find new ways to engage parents.

A book written years ago, *Parents in Perplexity* (Carter, 1938), addressed the differing desires of parents and planners of parent-teacher meetings. Carter found that planners often put together meetings to address issues they believed parents would find interesting. However, Carter described a meeting in which parents began to shout out questions from the floor, one after another. Their questions addressed what they, as parents, wanted to know and the kind of things with which they needed help. “*No solutions were arrived at, but a considerable amount of thinking took place, and these parents recognized the forum as a means for clearing with each other and possibly making some group decisions*” (1937, p. 74). Perhaps forums such as this will help parents to address their concerns and encourage increased involvement in school from those parents who do not see any purpose in attending meetings that do not concern their child. Alan Knox echoed the need for asking parents to find out what they need to know in *Helping Adults Learn* (1986), Knox suggested agenda building as a way for adults to uncover their needs and concerns. Following his example, teachers might gather students’ family members together and ask them what they would like to learn and/or discuss during the school year. In this manner, parents will have an opportunity to list topics in which they have an interest and that might help their children.

Family involvement does not take place only at school; much of the research about family involvement concludes that the most important sub-

category of family involvement is home learning support. Findings from my study support this approach. By providing opportunities for parents to help families learn how to assist their children with what they are learning, teachers and administrators would encourage worthwhile family involvement, and probably encourage more participation as an added bonus. By thinking of alternate ways to get information to parents, school personnel might find they are reaching more parents.

School personnel who hope to encourage parents to be more involved might obtain better results by enticing parents through explicit announcements about how their involvement will help children. Suggestions based on the findings of this study include:

- a. Think of parents as learners as well as teachers. Share information with them that can help them to assist their children. In addition to sharing negatives, share and emphasize the child's positive attributes and accomplishments.
- b. Address needs that parents think would be worth their time, such as behavior, child development, and learning new ways to help their children. Ask parents what they need instead of telling them what they need, and use a collaborative effort to solve problems.
- c. Some information can be sent home to parents rather than asking parents to come to school for a "parent night" If family involvement participation is being tracked, a tear off sheet that parents can complete and return should be included.

- d. Do not require frequent physical presence at school. Many parents cannot always attend school due to work schedules, child care, or lack of transportation. Limit school activities that require parents' presence to teacher conferences and activities that involve their children, rather than to general parent nights that might not apply to many children. Consider curriculum workshops that address specific areas in which parents can help at home.
- e. When school events are held and parent participation is requested, provide activities for children of all ages to encourage children and parents to want to come together.
- f. Use daily or weekly folders to help parents to be informed about what their children are doing in school. While many elementary schools use this system, perhaps middle and high schools could come up with a similar system.
- g. Use alternate forms of communication: email for those who have access to computers and short notes by mail for those who don't. Providing computer access for parents at school would be a helpful resource.
- h. Make family involvement a priority, and teach teachers how to communicate with parents. Encouraging family involvement should be a part of teacher training and professional development.

Recommendations for Further Research

The grounded theory of family involvement that developed as a result of this study is a starting point for further research. Because this study included just fifteen parents, further research could be conducted to investigate parent perceptions of family involvement. In addition to studying elementary school parents in a small urban school in Tennessee, larger urban schools with more diverse populations, as well as rural schools, could be used to replicate the study to see if the results would be duplicated. A study of middle and high school parents could also add to the knowledge of parent perceptions of family involvement. A final recommendation is to find a way to reach parents who are seldom involved in their children's learning to uncover their perspectives about family involvement.

Two areas that came up in this study and that that beg further research are:

- a) The phenomenon of cloistering children to keep them safe as a sub-category of family involvement , and
- b) The phenomenon of parents as learners.

This study contributes to the theory of family involvement but also makes important contributions to the fields of urban education and adult education. While families are involved at various levels, this study showed that most parents perceive that they are involved when they need to be involved. Parents are involved in their children's education in various ways and perceive worthwhile family involvement to include communication, giving their children reasons to

learn, supporting their children's learning at home and in school, and ensuring their children's growth and success. Efforts to encourage and increase family involvement should be targeted to these areas, giving parents ammunition and guidance in the areas that are important to them and that will help them to assist their children.

Finally, "Family involvement predicts children's academic achievement and social development as the progress from early childhood program through K-12 schools and into higher education" (Weiss, H. 2006). To that end, if parents feel it is important to be involved in their children's education, if they learn to fill that role successfully, they will be more likely to do "anything and everything" then can to further their children's education. If teachers and schools can find ways to help parents understand the vital importance of their involvement, to provide them with ways to help their children and the learning resources they need, then parent involvement is likely to become a more permanent key to increased academic progress for children.

In summary, parents' involvement in their children's education is a learning process for parents and is a classic example of the principles of adult education. Family involvement is a topic parents were eager to discuss, and the data illustrated what parents do to be involved in their children's education, as well as how and how they learned to do what they do. This study contributes to building an expanded vision of family involvement that is grounded in the parents' experiences and perspectives. Family involvement does not have to require frequent physical presence of parents at school. Parents want to do "anything

and everything” that they think will help their children grow and succeed.

Therefore, school personnel will have better success involving families and encouraging them to support their children by showing them the kind of activities that will be most effective. Helping parents to feel good about what they do to encourage their children’s growth is likely to increase their participation more than haranguing them for not attending school events. As James Coleman noted in his 1985 Ryerson lecture at the University of Chicago, *“Traditionally, the school has needed the support and sustenance provided by the family, in its task of education children. Increasingly, the family itself needs support and sustenance from the school – and through the school, from the other families with children in the school - in its task of raising children”*. Therefore, a new way of thinking about family involvement is in order.

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Appendices

YOUR IDEAS ARE IMPORTANT!



I am interested in family involvement in education, and I would like to talk with you about your views on being involved in your child's education.

If you agree to take part in this study, we will meet at a time and place that is convenient for you (for example, your home or office, your child's school, my office, or another place of your choosing). It will take about one hour.

You will receive a \$15 Wal-Mart gift card to thank you for your time.

The results of this study will be used to increase understanding about family involvement in children's education.

If you would like to participate, please complete the form below and return it to your child's teacher.

For more information, please call Reggie Curran at 531-4550.

Please contact me about the Family Involvement Study.

Name: _____

Telephone number: _____

Contact with Study Participants to Obtain Feedback Response

Name of Participant _____

Thanks again for meeting with me a few months ago and for helping me with my study on family involvement, and for taking the time to fill out this form today. Please look at the page that shows what you all told me family involvement means to you and what you do as involved parents. Also, please see the illustration about family involvement. Then fill out this page, telling me what you think of my summary of your words.

Will you please put this page in the enclosed envelope and send it back to me? Thanks!!!

Please circle the answer that reflects your views about this report.

How well does this summary confirm your perspective of family involvement in your child/children's education?

Exactly the way I see it

A lot like I see it

A little bit like I see it

Not at all like I see it

Do you have any comments about this report?

Any comments about the study in general?

Attachment B: Contact with Study Participants to Obtain Feedback

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Family Involvement in Children's Education: Parent Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to investigate parents' perspectives on involvement in their children's education, including their perceptions about what constitutes involvement, how parents make decisions about involvement, and the results of involvement when it occurs.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to answer some questions about family involvement in children's education. It will take about one hour to answer these questions. You will receive a \$15 Wal-Mart gift card to thank you for your participation.

RISKS

The anticipated risk of harm to you by participating in this research study is no greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine psychological examinations or tests.

BENEFITS

The results of this study will be used to provide school administrators a better understanding of parents' perspectives on family involvement in children's education.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the research study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting and assisting with the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

COMPENSATION

\$15 Wal-Mart Gift Card

EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT

The University of Tennessee does not "automatically" reimburse subjects for medical claims or other compensation. If physical injury is suffered in the course of research, or for more information, please notify the investigator in charge: Reggie Curran, (865) 531-4550.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher: Reggie Curran, at (865) 531-4550. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact Research Compliance Services of the Office of Research at (865) 974-3466.

_____ Participants' initials

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature

_____ Date _____

Investigator's signature

_____ Date _____

Demographic Data Form for Study Participants

Family Involvement in Children's Education: Parent Perspectives

Name

Street Address

City, State

Zip Code

Telephone Number

Age

Number of Children

Ages of Children

Grade Levels of Children

Last grade you completed in school

Marital Status

Are you currently employed outside the home?

If so, what kind of work do you do?

Race/Ethnicity

Gender

The following questions will be asked of study participants:

Definition of Family involvement as explained to parents: any way in which a family is involved in a child's education.

What does family involvement in your children's education mean to you?

Probe: What kind of things do you think families can do to help their children learn?

What have your experiences been with family involvement?

Probe: What kind of activities have you done to help your child with school and learning?

Is there any particular experience that stands out in your mind about family involvement?

Probe: Can you think of any time when you were involved with your child's education or learning? What did you think of the experience?

What has encouraged you to be involved?

Probe: Are there people or issues that have encouraged you to be active in your child's education?

What has discouraged you from being involved?

Probe: Are there people or issues that have discouraged you from being active in your child's education?

Can you give me any example of what came from your involvement in your child's education?

Do you allow your children to play outdoors in your neighborhood?

How were your parents involved in your education?

Attachment E: Interview Protocol

Confidentiality Agreement for Observers/Research Associates

I will not reveal any information that I read or hear about the participants in the study, Family Involvement in Children's Education: Parent Perspectives.

Printed Name

Title

Signature

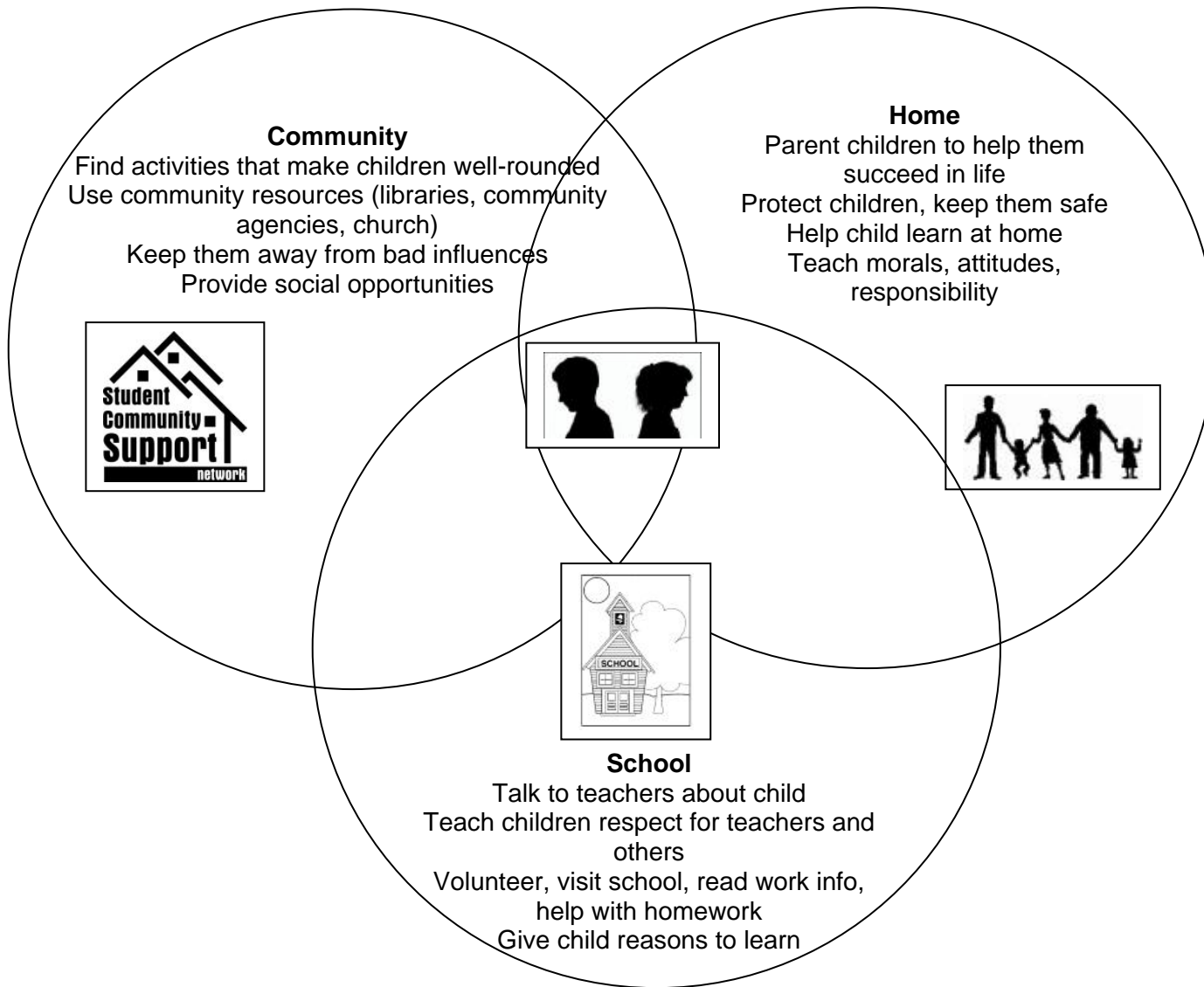
Date

Overall Theme of Study of Parent Perceptions of Family Involvement

Leaning to do whatever is needed – anything and everything - to ensure child's well being and growth.

What Parents do for family involvement		Description	
Communicate		Talking to teachers, students, other parents	
Give Them Reasons to Learn		Knowing/Seeing/Staying on Top	
		Using self as example	
		Career vs. work	
		Other reasons to learn	
Support learning in and out of school		Celebrations of progress	
		Expectations/Hope	
		Attend functions in school and out of school	
		Teacher/Family partnerships	
		Finding activities that help kids in home and school	
Ensure Child's Success/Growth		Cloistering – Keeping them safe/Sheltering from bad influences	
		Strengthening weaknesses and building strengths	
		Encouraging/Showing them how important they are	
		Teaching responsibility	
Access to Information	Voice	Action	Bridge to Future
Communicate with teachers about child's strengths and weaknesses	Share info about child with teachers	Find ways to strengthen weaknesses and build strengths	Give child reasons to learn: personal fulfillment, knowledge, ability to fulfill needs/desires
Find out about community programs that will benefit child	Ask for whatever will help the child	Celebrate their progress, work with child on lack of progress	Teach responsibility – financial, personal (moral)
Communicate with child about fears, likes, dislikes	Advocate for child	Keeping child safe	Helping child plan for future

Attachment G: Summary of Findings for Parent Response



Attachment H: Family Involvement Illustration for Parent Response

VITA

I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1948, and raised in the suburbs of Philadelphia in the small town of Sharon Hill. I attended Catholic schools in Delaware County and graduated from Archbishop Prendergast High School in 1966.

Although I had always wanted to be a teacher, I met my future husband, Bill, while in our early years in high school, and we decided we would spend the rest of our lives together. Assimilating the usual customs during that time in that area of the country, I decided not to spend money on college since I would be staying home to raise children and would not be pursuing a career. However, I still wanted to be a teacher, and heard about a special program in the Catholic community that would provide high school graduates with a fast track program over a summer and would allow them to teach in the fall. I entered the program, took classes at St. Joe's College and began teaching second grade at St. George School in 1967, continuing through 1969 after my marriage to Bill.

Next came four children; Christine, Carolyn, Bill, and Jim, and I was a stay-at-home Mom for most of those years, taking periodic classes at St. Joe's college, Northern Virginia Community College, and Brevard Community College and earning an Associate Degree in 1995. After moving to Knoxville, Tennessee, I began taking classes at the University of Tennessee in 1996, earning a Bachelor's degree in Family Studies in December 2000, and a Master's degree in

Adult Education in May 2002. During my years at UT, I have held a graduate teaching assistantship in the former College of Human Ecology, one at the Center for Literacy Studies, and one at the Thornton Athletic Center, all of which have helped me in my progress toward this degree.

I have been working at the Center for Literacy Studies for the past two years, with Family Involvement and Literacy as my main areas of concentration.