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What Educators Can Do To Engage Families In School-Based Education

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What Educators Can Do to Engage Families in School-Based Education

By

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of

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What Educators Can Do to Engage Families in School-Based Education

Abstract

This qualitative study, utilizing phenomenology, focuses on the role of educators in creating a strong home-school connection. The increasing number of students living in poverty requires educators to implement effective strategies for engaging parents and guardians in their students' schooling. Three significant themes emerged from the study as a result of data analysis. These identified themes are *Educators and parents see the importance of building positive relationships, increased connections are wanted by all and technology has helped to increase modes of communication, and events that highlight student achievement increase parent involvement.* The data allowed for several conclusions to be drawn regarding family engagement, including the following: the need for educators to increase the amount of communication to parents regarding their specific student(s), the need for school staff to increase the number of opportunities for families to come into the school to participate, and the need for educators to better equip parents with content specific information to allow them to better assist their children at home.

University of New England

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

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DEDICATION

To Elyse, thank you for always supporting and encouraging me. Your expertise and friendship are unmatched.

To my family, without you none of this would have been conceivable. Thank you for your love, support, encouragement, patience, and strength.

Most importantly, to my girls, Emma and Samantha, you are my world. I'm blessed to be your mother. Always work hard, as you have shown me the importance of aiming and striving for the moon.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As the number of students facing poverty increases, so does the number of students who are having difficulty finding academic success, as the low income correlates with poor achievement in school (childfund.org, 2015). With growing poverty among our public school children it is important for districts, schools, and teachers to be cognizant of the ways in which poverty affects how children grow, behave, and learn. Students are influenced in multiple ways; academically, socially, and/or physically, when they are living in an environment that doesn't allow them to have successful educational experiences. Educators recognize that factors, outside of the school day affect academic achievement, but cannot be controlled in school. Poverty factors which define their home environment include "material need – lack of food, fuel, health care, adequate clothing and housing and lack of resource (usually financial) to meet some or all of these needs" (McKinney, 2014, p. 203). Lack of material support which can be influenced by several factors including, but not limited to, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, academic preparation, and behavior (Stephan & et al, 2015), are all things that affect student academic outcomes. As the number of children affected by these influences increases, the importance for educators to implement strategies to counteract them does as well. In order to identify ways in which school and home can work together to ensure the success of each and every student, educators must first recognize the specific factors that influence achievement. Once they understand these effects, they can begin to develop new strategies to support student academic growth when they are faced with these influential factors.

Problem Statement

Students who come from an under-resourced background face numerous obstacles hindering academic growth. There are 2.2 billion children in the world and one billion are living in poverty (Global Issues, 2013). Improving attainment (of basic skills) and achievement in school for children from poor families is expected to enhance life chances and well-being and provide an opportunity for social mobility (McKinney, 2014). By systematically analyzing previous research conducted on the effects a student's home environment has on their academic achievement and the impact of family engagement in student achievement, the correlation and specific factors that influence student achievement will be outlined. By evaluating the influence of these factors on academic achievement and combing the perceptions of effective engagement strategies, educators can begin to implement effective methods to engage families in their child's education, influencing how students respond to them.

According to tolerance.org (2015), The National Parent Teacher Association gives five reasons to renew the push to engage parents: higher grades, test scores, and graduation rates, better attendance at school, fewer suspensions and incidents of violent behavior, increased motivation and self-esteem, and decreased drug and alcohol use. As educators realize the increased need to involve families in school based education, not all have the tools necessary to create an environment that promotes active, consistent family engagement.

Low levels of family resources (Antaramian, Jaki, Landesman, Lee Van Horn, Masyn, & Smith, 2009) and stressful experiences in the home (Bates, Dodge, Pettit, & Schwartz, 2013) have adverse effects on student achievement. These same factors prevent families from becoming involved. By systematically analyzing previous research conducted on the effects a student's home environment has on their academic achievement, the correlation and specific

factors that influence student achievement will be identified. Decades of research show that educators have had some success in providing material support to students and their relationships are invaluable to student achievement (Cotnoir & et al, 2014). However, educators need to extend those strategies to the families of those students, building positive relationships with parents/guardians, encouraging them to become active contributors to their child's education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to determine which strategies are most effective for educators to utilize when engaging families in school based education. "Family and community engagement is a proven strategy for strengthening schools", (McAlister, 2013, p. 40). Family engagement is a key concept in providing support for student learning. By surveying educators, administrators, other school personnel, and families of elementary school-aged children, a compilation of methodologies can be created. These effective strategies for educators to engage families in school, and support student academic achievement, can be used to counteract the influences of an under-resourced home life.

Research Questions

- What types of strategies do educators utilize to engage families in the educational process?
- What types of family and community engagement do families report as being most useful to promote active family engagement in school?
- What professional support do teachers need to reach beyond the classroom walls to provide material support for students?

Conceptual Framework

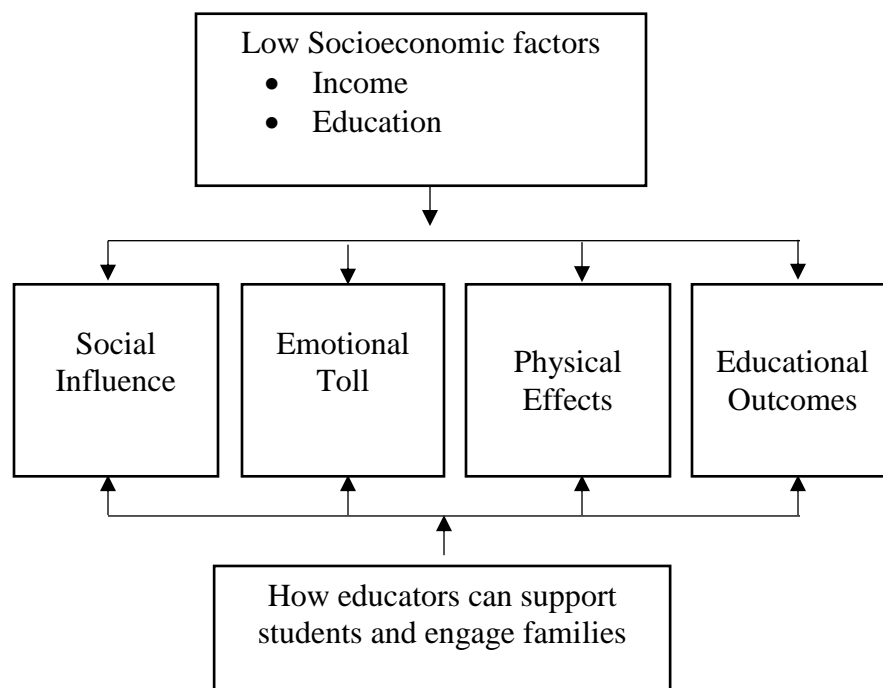


Figure 1: Poverty effects and school

Evaluating the way in which low socioeconomic factors influence student academic achievement, social influence, emotional toll, and physical effects can help educators identify or create methods to support students and engage families in the educational process. By engaging school communities and student's families, schools are strengthened (McAlister, 2013). The combination of strong relationships at home and strong relationships at school predict greater academic growth, especially for students of low socio-economic status (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004).

Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012, relay the goal phenomenology is to investigate the experience of the *lived experience* of people to identify the core essence of human experience (p. 32). Phenomenology is not only description, however; it is also an interpretive process in which the researcher interprets the meaning of the lived experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, p. 33). This

will allow for researched material to be analyzed and linked to methodologies that can be implemented to assist in engaging families in school based education. Using phenomenology as a basis of research study, methods in which educators and educational organizations can assist students living in low-socioeconomic homes were examined. School-based staff members who engage their families in the educational process create improved family engagement with school. Families can identify how they experienced these methods throughout the school year. By analyzing what educators and parents identify as the most effective methods of connecting with one another, and encouraging them to take an active role in the educational process, a more efficient compilation can be created. Not only will the combined research provide a structured approach toward deep understanding (Bloomberg & Volpe, p. 33) of engagement from all stakeholders, it will also impact students in a positive manner.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

The purpose of the study focuses on the belief that poverty and a lack of resources negatively influences student's academic achievement (Jensen, 2009) and that educators can counteract these factors with strategies that increase family engagement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). "Researchers concluded that many of the factors of low socioeconomic status that negatively affect student academic success could be overcome by better educating parents about these essential needs" (Jensen, 2009, p. 39). While most studies focus on urban populations, it is assumed that students of suburban and rural communities are affected in the same manner as urban students. Research needs to include all communities of students with a wider range of influential demographic factors.

Within each of the studies analyzed, factors that influence academics both positively and negatively were identified. However, studies failed to identify ways in which schools can help

lessen these influences, if negative, or enhance them if positive. Further research is needed to focus on two areas; 1. Accurately identify more effective ways for schools to engage families in education and 2. Identify ways in which schools help or encourage students who are negatively impacted by their home environment or enhance the support students get from a positive environment.

Significance of Study

The collected research examines multiple studies that identify the depth of the correlation between poverty and academic achievement of elementary level students, citing specific factors that influence student success. More importantly, by identifying these outside influences, they can begin to answer the question of how we can adjust in school to combat the negative impact that the home environment may have. Parental attitudes, involvement, education level, and socioeconomic status, along with the aforementioned factors, all have impacted the academic success of students in elementary education. The review of these factors and their relation to student success will show there is a comprehensive need for a solution that calls for collaboration between home and school in attempts to remedy a complex problem.

Definition of Terms

Academic achievement- Is defined as the level of actual accomplishment or proficiency one has achieved in an academic area, academic achievement (Crow and Crow, 1969) is the extent that a learner is profiting from instructions in a given area i.e., achievement is reflected by the extent to which skill and knowledge has been imparted to him or her (Deepa & Lawrence, 2013).

Engagement- Marzano (2011) notes that there is no one definition of engagement and that it means different things to different people. However, he examines the four topics that constitute

the model of attention and engagement and is typical of any engagement discussion: 1) emotions, 2) interest, 3) perceived importance, and 4) perceptions of efficacy (p. 3).

Socioeconomic status- The American Psychological Association defines this as the social standing or class of an individual or group, often measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation (2015).

Poverty- “Persons with less income than that deemed sufficient to purchase basic needs- food, shelter, clothing, and other essentials- are designated poor” (Jensen, 2009, p. 5).

Family Engagement in Education Act, 2015- Seeks to target capacity building and technical assistance for effective family engagement strategies where it’s needed most while encouraging state and school district flexibility to identify programming that works best for individual communities (National PTA, 2015).

Conclusion

The overall theme in the research presented here indicates that students who reside in homes of low socioeconomic status have a greater level of difficulties in school, and less active parent/guardian participation, than those who are from more affluent environments. When continuing to focus on students of poverty, where there is active parent involvement, positive perspectives of education, high expectations, and a higher level of parental educational achievement, students are reaching a higher level of academic success. Students who live in home environments where education isn’t important or a priority, parents are absent from education, or where parents have a negative view of education, and there is constant stress tend to consistently struggle academically. Family background is a key determinant of student performance (Guimaraes & Sampaio, 2013). Studies conclude there is a direct correlation

between poverty and academic achievement, which leads to a need for schools to, somehow, help counteract those negative effects.

As the number of students living in poverty continues to increase, educators are left with a vital question: How can educators engage families in order to counterbalance the affect poverty has on student's academic achievement? As most teachers realize the influence of poverty goes beyond academic growth and has life-long effects on students, the need for effective strategies is ever increasing to break the cycle.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

With increasing poverty among our public school children it is important for districts, schools, and teachers to understand the ways in which poverty affects how children grow, behave, and learn. Students are influenced in multiple ways; academically, socially, physically, when they are living in an environment that doesn't allow them to have successful educational experiences. Educators recognize that factors, outside of the school day, affect academic achievement, but cannot be controlled in school. "Poverty factors which define their home environment include, but are not limited to, material need – lack of food, fuel, health care, adequate clothing and housing and lack of resource (usually financial) to meet some or all of these needs" (McKinney, 2014, p. 203). These factors, which can be influenced by the parent's level of education, are all things that affect student academic outcomes but aren't included in the overall consideration when student academic growth is being calculated. In order to identify ways in which school and home can work together to ensure the success of each and every student, educators must first gain an understanding of the specific factors that influence achievement before they can begin to develop new strategies to support student academic growth when they are faced with these influential factors. By using the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database to research home-school connection, influence of poverty on students, and the importance of family involvement in school based education, collected research indicates that there is a direct correlation between a student's low socioeconomic environment, parent involvement and academic performance in school.

Poverty in education has been studied for decades, stemming from a constant, and growing, need to identify the influence it has on students. Studies vary in grade level,

demographics, race, gender, and nationality. Those dating beyond 10 years were discarded, although many draw the same conclusions as those that are recent. With a growing number of students being identified as in poverty, there has been a recent increase in studies analyzing how a child's academic growth is being influenced. The need for educators to implement strategies to assist these students and rectifying negative influences is growing. This literature on home-based factors that influence school success, will be examined to identify of how schools/educators can reduce the negative influences a low socio-economic student's home environment has on their academic achievement. Additionally, studies conducted on the influence of family involvement emphasize the influence that active engagement by those in a student's immediate home environment, has on academic achievement and the importance of a positive, strong home school connection. "Synthesis of data collected from schools that have been involved in the National Network of Partnership Schools appeared to indicate that regardless of the student's socioeconomic and/or ethnic background, when parents are involved at home and in school, there is a positive effect on the student's grades, attendance, and behavior" (Walker, 2003, p. 1). With this understanding comes the need to identify the most effective methods of engaging student's parents/guardians in their child's schooling.

Most studies in the review focus on urban populations. Research needs to include all communities of students with a wider range of influential demographic factors, such as suburban or rural poverty. Within each of the studies analyzed, factors that influence academics both positively and negatively were identified. However, until recently, most studies failed to identify ways in which teachers, educators, and administrators can help lessen these influences, if negative, or enhance them if positive. Further research is needed to focus on two areas; 1. Accurately identify more effective ways for school staff to engage families in the education of

their children and 2. Identify ways in which schools can encourage poverty stricken students who are negatively impacted by their home environment or enhance the support students get from a positive environment.

The following research examines multiple studies that identify the depth of the correlation between poverty and academic achievement of elementary level students, citing specific factors that impact student success and the influence of a family that is actively involved in their child's education. More importantly, as educators continue to understand these outside influences, they can begin to answer the question of how we can adjust in school to combat the negative impact that the home environment may have. Parental attitudes, involvement, education level, and socioeconomic status, along with the aforementioned factors, all have impacted the academic success of students in elementary education. The review of these factors and their relation to student success will show there is a comprehensive need for a solution that calls for collaboration between home and school in attempts to remedy a complex problem.

Objectives of the Study

Students who come from a high-poverty background face numerous obstacles hindering academic performance. Improving attainment and achievement in school for children from poor families is expected to enhance life chances and well-being and provide an opportunity for social mobility (McKinney, 2014). Increasing family engagement is, “a crucial resource not only for individual student achievement, but also for catalyzing and sustaining school improvement and for building school cultures that support all students” (Comer & Haynes, 1992; Epstein 1995; Henderson & Mapp 2002; Sebring et al. 2006; Henderson et al. 2007).

By surveying educators and parents, findings can begin to highlight what each group perceives as the most effective methods for engaging families in the educational process.

Systematically analyzing previous research conducted on the importance of family engagement, especially of those children who come from an under-resourced home environment, can assist educators in increasing the connection they have with the families of their students. By identifying the perceptions of parents/guardians and what they value in communication, educators will have a better understanding of what they can do to help increase the home-school connection. Engaging families can help to counteract the influences poverty has on students.

Poverty Influencing Student Achievement

High levels of poverty among school age children continue to be a barrier to academic learning. As the number of students facing poverty increases, so does the number of students who are having difficulty finding academic success, as the low income correlates with poor achievement in school (childfund.org, 2015). The latest data collected from the United States by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), relays that 51 percent of students in public schools, in the United States, were low income in 2013 (Southern Education Foundation, 2015). Students living in a low socio-economic environment are affected physically, mentally and emotionally. Poor prenatal care, increased illness and injury, nutritional problems, exposure to pollutants, hazardous neighborhoods, lack of educational materials, and residential instability are just a few of the issues poverty stricken students suffer from (Blazer, 2009).

Family involvement can also be influenced by socio-economic status. Parents/guardians that have to work multiple jobs to provide for their children or dependents are not as actively involved in school as other social classes (Jeynes, 2007). Parental involvement includes engaging in both activities in-school and at home. Modes of involvement include: communication-notes, emails, memos, telephone calls; and participation in conferences, events, PTA, and fundraising. Parent involvement also includes assisting students who complete

homework outside of school, and those whose students are being homeschooled (Noel, Redford, & Stark, 2013). Active parent involvement, both in-school and at home, has proven to be a determining factor of good grades and positive life choices (Wiseman, 2009). Parent attitudes relayed to children at an early age set the stage for student perception of education. Combining positive academic interaction between parents and children, along with a positive nurturing environment impacts the readiness of children for school (Bradley, McKelvey, Whiteside-Mansell, 2011).

Parents that have developed strategies for fostering math and literacy skills, have helped young students to master early math and literacy concepts, that promote future academic success (Dreambox learning, 2008). An additional study noted that positive adult relationships also influence student achievement (Al-Shabatat & Ismail, 2009). The quality of these relationships has shown to have an influence on academic growth. Studies show that active parent involvement leads to higher academic success of all students-including those identified as gifted and talented students. Environment plays a vital role in the development of giftedness to achieve substantial aptitude (Al-Shabatat & Ismail, 2009).

Socioeconomic status influences how students succeed in school. Family background is a key determinant of student performance (Guimaraies & Sampaio, 2013). As family income increases and the parent's level of education increases, expectations increase, student work ethic increases, and, subsequently, so do student scores. Additionally, Guimaraies and Sampaio point out, families with a higher income level can afford extra tutoring for their children (2013). High income household are more likely to be involved in a student's education (Hartlep & Ellis, 2010).

The effects of positive interactions between home and school, and the importance of a supportive home environment are not restricted to one age or academic level. Studies show that the academic achievement of all students is positively impacted when it is influenced with positive home environments, and supportive parents who encourage an optimistic view of education. When looking cross-culturally, the effects lead to the same results. As cultures outside of the United States educate their students differently, it has been shown that parental involvement, and learning within informal settings, leads to positive academic outcomes as it may not be the importance of family in the cultural context, but rather in the importance of family (Dentzau, 2013).

A student's home environment influences academic achievement in many ways. Variables related to family background, such as family income and a parent's schooling, have been studied in order to understand the obstacles faced by students coming from a disadvantaged background (Guimaraes & Sampaio, 2013). Low levels of family resources (Antaramian, Jaki, Landesman, Lee Van Horn, Masyn, & Smith, 2009) and stressful experiences in the home (Bates, Dodge, Pettit, & Schwartz, 2013) have adverse effects on student achievement. Additionally, "structural family factors and behaviors influence risk and resilience in adolescents" (Boon, 2008, p. 86).

Low socioeconomic status influences students in multiple ways. Children in low income households suffer from a variety of additional concerns. Lack of resources, such as food, clothing, or basic needs, force students to focus on matters other than academics. Students are needed by families to obtain jobs at an earlier age, pulling focus away from academics. Parents aren't home to assist with homework, and often, older children are responsible for younger siblings. Students who live in poverty are subject to prenatal disadvantages, increased illness

and injury, nutritional problems, exposure to pollutants, hazardous neighborhoods, family violence, lack of attention, lack of materials, and general instability (Blazer, 2009).

Negative or infrequent relationships with adults also adversely affect student achievement. Studies show that students who are reentering school are negatively impacted by the poor nature of student teacher relationships (Whanell & William, 2011). The quality of teacher-student and parent-student relationship directly affects academic outcomes. Low income families who lack access to technology run the risk of infrequent communication. As technology is increasingly prevalent in schools, educators utilize it as a mode of communication. When families lack that access, it limits their ability to frequently connect with schools.

Poverty-related stress, and its effects, is carried into the school day, inhibiting academic growth and social interactions. “Students subjected to stress may lack crucial coping skills and experience significant behavioral and academic problems in school” (Jensen, 2009, p. 22). Research also identified that the rate of suspension, combined with structural family factors, and low academic achievement level, contribute to greater student drop out (Boon, 2008). Factors that lead to low achievement tend to flow into other avenues of student life and for an extensive period of time. Early risk significantly predicts overall educational attainment (Burchinal, et al, 2010). Students identified at a young age to be at risk are affected even into early adulthood.

Studies also examine the role schools play in fostering parent involvement. School administrators need training to help them broaden their views of parent involvement (Ferrara, 2011). How schools employ family engagement is the most important factor influencing family involvement. Students that come from poverty stricken backgrounds bring their difficulties into school with them. Chronic exposure to poverty causes the brain to physically change in a detrimental manner (Jensen, 2009, p. 2). The four primary risk factors afflicting families living

in poverty are: emotional and social changes, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues (Jensen, 2009, p. 7). Students suffering from social factors common in a low socioeconomic environment are seeking basic needs and survival. School, typically, is secondary. When a family is embedded in poverty, the child's education becomes least on their scale of preferences, for a family without resources, survival takes a front seat (Gassama, 2012, p. 1). When children are in fear, their ability to think is greatly affected, not being able to think makes one incapable of learning. This chronic difficulty explains why children of poverty are often lagging behind in development (Gassama, 2012, p.12).

Role of School-Based Leaders in Recognizing and Mitigating the Lack of Resources

The number of children living in poverty is consistently increasing. It is important for educators to identify ways to counter the effects poverty has on student learning. Building a strong communication link between schools and families, especially for those students coming from those under-resourced home environments (Ferrara, 2011) is vital to reducing the influence of those effects. Using technology to increase communication is another suggestion. In order to diminish behavior problems, teachers and parents need to use technology as a means of providing fast, efficient communication, which, in turn, affects academic success. (Grant, 2011)

Smaller class sizes can help reduce the gap between high and low income students (Blazer, 2009). Blazer goes on to identify that highly qualified teachers who are trained to work specifically with children of poverty can help to combat the negative effects of low income families. Specialized training for working with students of poverty would also improve a school staff's ability to effectively communicate with families, especially in districts where the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch is significant.

Although few suggestions were offered by researchers for engaging families in their child's schooling, additional studies, and further research is needed, some schools have been more successful than others. While research does, overwhelmingly, support findings that the poverty negatively influences student achievement, there are high achieving, high poverty schools. Schools and teachers that aim to meet the basic needs of their students and families remove barriers that inhibit learning (Cleaver, 2011). According to Blazer (2011), reforms relevant to high poverty schools include:

- Socioeconomic integration to reduce economic disparities
- Cultural congruence with instruction
- Greater availability to advanced coursework and career education
- Smaller schools and classrooms
- Highly qualified teachers
- Awareness of the culture of poverty and sensitivity to children's needs
- Efforts to reduce student mobility
- Preschool programs
- School based health centers and nutritional programs

The combination of strong relationships at home and strong relationships at school predict greater academic growth, especially for students of low socio-economic status (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004). In return, Gregory and Weinstein also note that high achievement promotes positive relationships and perceptions, creating a cycle where each factor positively influences the other. It is acknowledged that positive relationships, whether at home or at school, have an effect on academic achievement. Not only does this apply to early learnings, but it also extends

to students who have dropped out and are re-entering school. The quality of student-teacher relationships influenced the quality of academic outcomes (Whanell & Allen, 2011, p. 23).

“Along with various socioeconomic and cultural factors, success in high poverty urban schools is also determined by variables at the individual level, in the form of various learning skills and likings” (Olivares-Cuhat, 2011, p. 2). These variables include: learning style preferences, language learning strategies, and emotional intelligence (Olivares-Cuhat, 2011).

Family Engagement

Family and community engagement is a proven strategy for strengthening schools (McAlister, 2013). Eric Jensen (2009) states that including parents and providing adult support and outreach are important to building strong relationships (p. 73). “Schools have limited funding, yet many community agencies have the resources and the will to donate or partner with schools to provide support services” (Jensen, 2009, p. 73). Jensen continues to outline how community outreach can be used to provide free medical services, free tutoring, free mental health services, or free books. When these critical needs are not met, all family members experience additional stress in the home. If schools can assist in providing resources, they “remove real-world concerns that are much higher on their mental and emotional priority lists” (Jensen, 2009, p. 73). As poverty increases the need for a greater degree of parent involvement exists.

The Essential Supports for School Improvement report notes that program development must occur along three dimensions: (1) Teachers need to be knowledgeable about student culture and the local community and draw on these in their lessons, and (2) School staff must reach out to parents and community to engage them in the processes of strengthening student learning, and (3) Schools should draw on a network of community organizations to expand services for

students and their families (Sebring, et al, 2006). The home-school connection is important to ensuring student success. A study of school improvement found that schools who had teachers that were “especially active” in meeting with and telephoning parents, and in sharing instructional materials to reinforce learning at home, had larger gains in student achievement (USDOE, 2011). The impact of parental involvement is great and educational staff needs to make a larger effort in engaging families in the educational process.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy suggests that the goal of phenomenology is to study the structures of consciousness as experienced from the first person point of view (Smith, 2013). Phenomenology will allow for researched material to include first-hand experience of engagement strategies from the point of view of educators, administrators, and parents of elementary school-aged children. The information they provide will be analyzed and linked to methodologies that can be implemented to assist poverty stricken students in thriving academically. Phenomenology looks at how participants’ different views of family engagement and their roles in education can be a factor in actual involvement. Using phenomenology as a basis of the research study, methods in which educators and educational organizations can assist students living in low-socioeconomic homes can be identified by highlighting real life experiences, including parent/guardian perceptions of their role in education and how welcomed active involvement is from classroom teachers. When analyzing what role poverty plays in a child’s overall development, educators can begin to identify the best strategies for involving parents/guardians. Not only will the combined research lead to increased parent involvement, but students’ education will be impacted in a positive manner.

Conclusion

The overall themes presented here indicate that students who reside in homes of low socioeconomic status have a greater level of difficulties in school than those who are from more affluent environments and that family engagement approaches can help to reduce those negative influences. Specifically, with continuing to focus on students of poverty, where there is active parent involvement, positive perspectives of education, high expectations, and a higher level of parental educational achievement, students are reaching a higher level of academic success. Students who live home environments where education isn't important or a priority, guardians are absent from education, or where guardians have a negative view of education, encounter constant stress and consistently struggle academically. Family background is a key determinant of student performance (Guimaraes & Sampaio, 2013, p. 47). Reviewing the multiple studies that have been conducted, indicating there is a direct correlation between poverty and academic achievement, leads to a need for schools to, somehow, help counteract those negative effects.

As most teachers realize the influence of poverty goes beyond academic growth and has life-long effects on students, the need for effective strategies is ever increasing to break the cycle. Reviewed literature already highlights the negative impact of poverty and positive impact of an actively engaged family. The need for implementing effective engagement strategies continues to grow.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Research has shown that when families are active in their child's education, student achievement rises. When families are involved in their children's education, children earn higher grades and receive higher scores on tests, attend school more regularly, complete more homework, demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviors, graduate from high school at higher rates, and are more likely to enroll in higher education than students with less involved families (USDOE, 1997).

The United States Department of Education states (2014) The Challenge:

Many states, districts, and schools struggle with how to execute partnerships and cultivate and sustain positive relationships with families. A common refrain from educators is that they have a strong desire to work with families from diverse backgrounds and cultures, and to develop stronger partnerships of shared responsibility for children's outcomes between home and school, but that they do not know how to accomplish this.

The number of children being affected by poverty creates a need for educators to identify effective strategies for engaging families in their student's education. In the proposed qualitative study, utilizing phenomenology, data will be examined to investigate the meaning of the *lived experience* of people to identify the core essence of human experience or phenomena as described by the research participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 32) focusing on the home-school connection.

The guiding question is: *What are teacher, administrative, and parent perceptions of successful family engagement strategies?* Additional questions include:

- What types of strategies do teachers and administrators utilize to engage families in the educational process?
- What types of family and community engagement strategies do families report as most useful to promote active family involvement at school?
- What additional strategies, do families feel, educators should adopt to promote family engagement?
- What professional supports do teachers need to reach beyond the classroom walls to provide material support for students?

Site Selection

The study was conducted in one school district consisting of two suburban elementary schools, kindergarten through 5th grade, in Upstate New York. According the US Census Bureau and the New York State Education Department poverty levels in this district reach 35% in one building and 51% in the other. Additionally, this district has been engaging in professional development revolving around Eric Jensen's *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind* and Carol Dweck's, *Mindset*. The study provides additional information to the existing theoretical framework they are focusing on.

Conducting the study in this environment allowed for data to be compiled from a setting which targets the low-socioeconomic status student, placing an emphasis on strategies best employed to engage this specific group. As the students of this district, and each building within

the district, fall into that under-resourced group, they offer a varying perspectives of engagement, education, and the relationship between home and school, than those of an affluent background.

Participants/Sample

The participants of the study represent three stakeholder groups: classroom teachers, administrators and parents. All faculty members, from each school, were asked to participate. Classroom teachers were asked to identify the most effective methods of family engagement, at the classroom level, that they have discovered through personal experience. Two administrators and two school social workers were invited to contribute the same information as classroom teachers, with a focus on the building level. Parents were asked to provide examples of the most effective methods educators (classroom teachers and administrators) have employed to encourage them to increase participation in their student's education, and their perceptions of those methods.

The procedure began with all individuals receiving a written invitation to participate. Each letter included the purpose and method of data collection, including their rights as participants. All stakeholders (teachers, administrators, and parents) were asked to provide perspectives about home-school interactions, and created a detailed and more comprehensive view of the home-school connection, its importance, and what they feel are the most valuable strategies for schools to use when including families.

(See appendix A)

Data

The qualitative study identified the strategies/methods that encourage the greatest amount of family engagement in school. The survey and interview/focus group data documented stakeholder perspectives on specific strategies, or influencing factors on family engagement.

Data collected includes survey responses from classroom teachers, social workers and/or administrators, and parents of elementary school aged students.

Data was collected with each participant survey. The majority of the data was in the form of multiple choice responses with some short responses. A web-based survey was created, via Survey Monkey, and sent electronically to school district employees. Hard copy surveys were sent home with students for parents to complete. Additionally, interviews were conducted of school social workers, select classroom teachers and administrators, and parents were willing to offer a live response in interviews. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions geared towards eliciting examples to explain answers. These interviews were transcribed and classified with survey responses of members of the appropriate group.

All data were collected by this participating researcher and arranged by site and participant role. After the initial round of data collection, it was determined that other schools, in our area, did not need to be included. However, if it had been necessary, any additional schools would have met the same parameters as initial school-suburban elementary schools (K-5) with a poverty rate not below 30%.

Analysis

All responses were pooled at each site and collected at a set date and time. In conjunction with the interviews, all interviews were recorded for transcription, maximizing the data collection. Brief notes were taken during the interview and contributed to expanding the conversation and probing for deeper meaning and clarification. Following Creswell's qualitative process of data analysis, all collected and transcribed data was explored and coded based on text segments in order to create broad themes. Initially, collected data was analyzed, coded, and grouped by method of engagement and reported effectiveness. Creswell (2012) states the

process of analyzing text (or images) in qualitative research begins when you code the data (p. 243). Segments were labeled with codes which included; setting of the participant, participant's perception of home involvement, activities and methods of engagement, frequency of involvement, and other factors, depending on the responses received.

Open ended questions were asked during interviews with a mix of open-ended and closed-ended on questionnaires. The advantage of this type of questioning is that predetermined closed-ended questions can net useful information to support theories and concepts in literature (Creswell, 2012, p. 220). Both types of questions elicit responses that can be coded in the aforementioned categories.

Participant rights

To gain support from participants, there is a need to convey that they are participating in a study and they will be informed of the purpose (Creswell, 2012, p. 231). Participants' rights were relayed in various ways. Prior to data collection, consent was granted by the district superintendent. This initial permission was sought from the district superintendent to conduct faculty surveys and distribute family surveys. All participants were advised of study details, including the goal of giving back findings when the study was complete, if they so desire. Involvement in the survey, either web-based or hard copy, was voluntary and responses were given anonymously. Each subgroup had distinguishing characteristics in their questions that note affiliation. Interview transcripts withheld all names, only relaying position and/or grade level if approved by the participant.

Unintended outcomes may include the realization that an educator's lack of effective strategies may contribute to low parent involvement, and there is a greater need for professional

development. Additionally, the study revealed counterproductive attitudes towards home involvement.

Potential limitations of the study

As a participant researcher, I found that the staff at the chosen site was supportive with this study and eager to learn of the findings. While the study was approved by the superintendent and the accompanying board of education, the surveys were strictly voluntary. If there is a lack of participation, results will be limited. As a participating researcher and member of a neighboring district, yet former member of the participating district, those who are acquaintances may choose to remain silent. Additionally, the study was dependent on clear and unobstructed responses. Lastly, if educators felt that their administrators or parents would pass judgement on the current strategies they use to engage families, in comparison to what the study determined are the most effective or informed strategies, it may have affect their desire to participate.

Conclusion

Previous research outlines the importance of family involvement in student achievement. The study aimed to identify the most effective methods for educators to engage families in school based education. Educators need to build strong, long-term relationships, identify the most critical areas of need, and offer content that parents need most (Jensen, 2009, p. 73). These matters are necessary in strengthening the home school connection. Additionally, educators can systematically organize their communication with the most effective engagement methods, encouraging active and consistent family involvement. By identifying the most effective strategies, educators can continue to increase family participation which will, in turn, have a positive influence on student achievement. *How* we do that is the focus of this study.

CHAPTER 4:

DATA

As identified in previous chapters, the home-school connection is becoming increasingly important as external demands are occupying parents/guardians time and attention, decreasing the amount of time they are dedicating to their student's education. "The term 'parental involvement' in schools reflects a broad spectrum of parental actions and activities focused on various issues and conducted within and outside school ground" (Fisher, 2016, p. 462). As the number of students living in poverty increases, educators are experiencing pressures to increase levels of parent engagement. "The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education reports that family-school partnerships lead to gains for just about everyone involved in education." According to the coalition, "Students do better in school and in life. Parents become empowered. Teacher morale improves. Schools get better. Communities grow stronger" (Edutopia, 2011). With external demands on their time and energy ever-increasing, educators need to utilize various strategies to connect with families and involve them in education. As the literature has identified the effects poverty has on a child's education, "poverty and deep poverty can put these children at greater risk for developmental and health problems" (Ratcliffe and McKernan, 2012, p. 3). It is vital for educators to combat these effects as best they can, requiring them to employ new, and differing, strategies to engage parents/guardians of their students. However, not all educators are aware of what the most useful strategies for engaging families are, failing to create that connection needed to promote parent involvement.

The study was designed to ascertain what educators and parents of elementary aged children perceived as the most effective strategies for building the home-school connection. The survey was distributed in an upstate New York school district, consisting of two elementary buildings with poverty levels recorded at 35% and 51%. Sixty parents took part in the project, completing the survey and offering their viewpoint on the home-school connection. Identifying the most effective strategies for engaging home with school based education requires the perspectives of both educators and parents/guardians. For one group to be represented, and the other not considered, would mean losing a perspective vital to the process. By analyzing the differing perspectives, the researcher can identify similarities and themes within the responses. These themes, as reported as both home-based and school-based, are recognized as effective strategies for home engagement. Prior to identifying the discovered themes, it is necessary to highlight, briefly, a synopsis of responses from the participating groups of responders, both educators and parent/guardians. While a description of responses will be shared, it is important to note that there will be no personal, identifiable data provided on participants to protect their anonymity. Additionally, data will be reported by subgroup with corresponding individual responses where appropriate. The results of the survey identify common themes, and perceived effective strategies, from both subgroups.

Parent Responses

The survey parents and guardians were asked to complete was offered in either a web-based or hard copy version. The survey incorporated both multiple choice and short response answers. Parent questions were focused on:

- Discovering the current methods of communication
- Why communication is initiated

- How often educators communicate
- Current levels of involvement
- What schools could do to encourage greater involvement
- The perceived importance of the home-school connection

Question 1: How often does your child's teacher contact you?

Fifty-five percent of responding parents report being contacted most frequently when there is an issue at school. "When parents and teachers together view their relationship positively, teachers indicate that children demonstrate greater social competence and fewer behavioral problems in the school setting" (Kim, Minke, et al, 2012, p. 6). When educators are connecting with parents and guardians only when there is a concern at school, it creates a barrier, inhibiting positive relationships from being built. "Teachers can discourage parent involvement, whether they are aware of it or not. Factors, such as negative school experiences, may prevent parents from participating at school" (Hansen, 1999, p. 8). The second most reported frequency of communication is that it comes weekly, 33%, in the form of newsletters from the classroom teacher with no information specifically pertaining to the children, but general happenings in the classroom.

Question 2: I prefer my child's teacher contact me by:

Parents and guardians had the ability to answer this question with more than one response. Responses included; note home, newsletters only, phone call, email, and other (with written response). Eighty-two percent of respondents chose email as their preference, followed by a phone call. Additional written responses include; text, Facebook, and whatever works best for the educator. "Instead of delivering a top-down message, social-media tools allow for back-and-forth dialogue between home and school. This can facilitate discussions in both large and

small learning communities” (Edutopia, 2011). Teachers are using multiple web-based applications to reach out to parents/guardians, providing them with information throughout the school day.

Question 3: What does your child’s teacher most often contact you about?

Parents had the option of choosing more than one response with this question. The main reasons parents are contacted include; academics (42%) and behavior (40%). More specific information that was reported indicated special education communication, Section 504 plan or individualized education plan (IEP) accommodations and modifications. Sheehey and Sheehey (2007) relay the importance of communication with parents stating that parents might not have the time to respond to written communications but appreciate hearing how their child is doing.

Question 4: How often are you invited to meetings to learn specific information regarding your child?

With some parents having reservations about becoming involved in school it is important for educators to increase their efforts to strengthen communication. “The problem would seem that to be a lack of common ground. Parents and professionals have difficulty establishing a level of collaboration that will benefit the child because they are coming from very different places” (Sheehey & Sheehey, 2007, p. 3). Parent responses revealed that 58% of them feel they are only ‘sometimes’ invited to attend meetings at school, followed by 24% who felt they are always invited. Additional comments that reveal reasons for invitations include, but not limited to, special education meetings and discussions regarding student behavior. Hansen believes that parent communication should begin with a welcome letter the first day of school with initial meetings to occur immediately. “This sets a positive tone for the year and lets the parents know

the teacher is available as a resource to them” (Hansen, 1999, p. 7). By creating early, positive contact educators are helping to build the home-school connection.

Question 5: What could school staff do to increase communication?

Past research recommends numerous methods of increasing communication with parents; Hansen (1999) lists welcome letters, conferences, phone calls, newsletters, and journaling as positive steps, Edutopia (2011) recommends web-based communication with virtual classrooms, mobile phone applications, texts, and surveys, school film nights with discussions, and reading programs, while Sheehey & Sheehey (2007) stress that parents ask for information, share experiences, be actively involved and be available.

The survey that was conducted also returned several suggestions for school to increase communication. Although these responses were personal to what these parents have experienced, some of them mirrored the previously researched responses. Reportedly, parents would like the school to send daily notes, weekly notes, an increase in parent conferences, an increase in email communication, and utilize social media. In addition, several comments state they would like to see an increase in events that highlight student achievement.

Question 6: What types of functions would encourage parents to become more active in school?

Interestingly, several respondents opted to not answer this question. Those that did would like to see an increase in school functions-student celebrations, such as morning programs and art shows. Others would like to see additional field trips where parents could serve as chaperones. The response that was most often repeated, other than additional events, was a request for educators to deliver instruction to parents on current methods and strategies,

education topics related to reading, parenting, peer pressure, nutrition, drugs, and core methods... “The things that we did not learn back in our day” as one respondent stated.

Question 7: How often do you help your child with their school work?

In addition to parent involvement including communication with and participation in school, parents can make a positive impact by becoming involved at home. When asked how often parents assist their students with homework, the most frequent response was ‘always’ at 58%, followed by 26% stating often. Ten percent of respondents chose ‘other’ as their response, stating that they help their student as needed, or they check work when it’s completed, not necessarily helping as they work.

Question 8: Are you an active member of your school’s PTA/PTO?

The respondents had four options to choose from with this question; active member (30%), member but not active (40%), not a member (26%), and other (4%). The two that chose other responded with ‘officer and active on district level’ and ‘not a member, but active with after school groups for kids’.

Question 9: On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is the home-school connection?

Using a scale of 1 (not important) to 10 (very important) parents ranked the importance of the relationship between home and school. The average or mean of the responses was 9.76. Parents recognize the importance of home-school connection, 41 out of 49 respondents who answered this question felt that a 10 out of 10 was most appropriate. “Public agenda’s research among low-income and minority parents over the last decade shows indisputably that nearly all

recognize the importance of education in their children's lives and they are typically less satisfied with local schools than parents overall" (Johnson, 2011, p. 9).

Descriptive Analysis I

Parents were asked to offer their perspectives on how involved they currently are, what communication methods they are currently using to contact the teacher or how they are contacted, how often they are contacted and why they are being contacted. Technology, as reported, has helped to increase the amount of communication between educators and parents/guardians. The use of text messaging and email, and web-based learning management systems, such as Schoology, Google Classroom, and Remind, are more convenient methods which also expedite the response rate. These methods are especially being used when student behavior or academics need to be addressed in real-time. In regards to why parents are being contacted by school, 42% of that communication is about academics, 40% is about behavior. Other reasons for school contact that were reported pertained to special education, weekly newsletters, and student medical concerns.

Parents of primary-aged students report to be, slightly, more involved in school than those of intermediate grade level students. Of the parents of primary-aged students (53% of the total), 38% of them reported that they always respond to communication initiated by the teacher as compared to 21% of the intermediate grade level parents which represents 47% of the total, while overall 58% of responding parents report they only 'sometimes' respond to their child's teacher when they are contacted. Detailed responses as to why they only sometimes return the teacher-initiated communication include; time, work hours, lack of energy, and frustrating conversations. Additionally, 71% of parents offered suggestions for increasing parent

involvement in school. Suggestions include; additional art or music shows that highlight the students, a built in morning or afterschool program where parents have an active role, free or low cost functions where food is offered, increasing the amount of evening family functions, and, the suggestion most frequently repeated (25% of responses), offer evenings for parents to learn the materials their students are learning in school so they are better prepared to support them at home.

Educator Responses

Educators were asked to complete a survey consisting of both multiple choice and short answer responses. The educators that were asked to participate work with students in kindergarten through grade 5 and are members of the same school district as the participating parents/guardians. A total of 71 educators accessed the questionnaire. However, not all answered every question. They, too, were offered a hard copy to complete or the opportunity to complete a web-based version. Receiving over seventy completed educator surveys, the common themes among them weren't much different from the parent/guardian surveys. Teacher survey questions focused on:

- How often they contact their student's parents/guardians
- What they find the most effective method is
- What they contact parents or guardians about
- If they would like increased communication
- The types of functions most attended by parents

Question 1: How often do you contact your student's parents/guardians?

Forty-five responses were given for this question, with 38% reporting weekly contact, 7% monthly, 44% when there is an issue, and 11% when there is an event at school. In addition, 12 educators responded with comments in lieu of choosing from the multiple choice selections. Typed in responses include; when a child has done marvelously well, some daily (but not always the same parents), and biweekly communication. Hansen (1999) states that teachers who use journaling as a means of communication, on a regular basis, were able to plan more effective instruction, could better understand their students, inform parents of student success, and convey their philosophies or learning and teaching.

Question 2 and 3: What mode of communication do you use most to contact parent(s) /guardian(s)? What do you find to be the most effective mode of communication?

Sixty-four educators chose to reveal which mode of communication was utilized most. 44% of the respondents reportedly use email as their main mode of communication, 30% use the telephone, 16% write personalized notes home, and 10% rely on newsletters only. The responses are parallel to those regarding the most effective mode. Sixty educators responded with the following responses: note home- 10%, newsletters- 15%, email- 43%, and phone- 32%. Combined with email, the creation of web-based applications within the education realm, was the most utilized and effective means of communication with parents/guardians, according to the written in comments.

Question 4: When you contact parents/guardians, how often do they respond?

The responses to this question seem to contradict those of the parents/guardians. Educators report that only 15% of parents always respond to their attempts at communication,

37% sometimes do, while 47% often respond. As with any relationship, communication is an important piece to finding success. The Technical Assistance and Training System (2010) identifies barriers to family involvement including pressures on families, families feeling unwelcome, families not knowing how to contribute, language and cultural barriers. They also state children need a strong home-school connection to be successful in school.

Question 5: What do you, most often, contact home about?

The responses to this question were directly in line with the parents who answered what they are most contacted about. Of the fifty-two educators who responded to this question, 44% reported to contact home about academics, matching the 44% who reportedly contact home about behavior while the other 12% contact home with information about school functions.

Question 6: Would you like increased communication with your student's parents/guardians? If so, what would be the most effective method of accomplishing this?

Thirty-three percent of the educators that responded to this question stated that they would not like increased communication with their student's parents. In addition, 27% feel the way to accomplish increased communication is for parents to be more involved, or as one stated "it would be great if I heard back from more parents". Methods of increasing communication being offered include email, blogs, greater use of web-based applications, and multiple modes of accessing parents. To encourage parents to utilize technology to communicate with schools, Edutopia (2011) recommends holding a family technology night to introduce new-media resources to the parent community.

Question 7: What types of functions do parents most attend?

Responses to this question mirrored the parent's responses. Educators report the highest attended functions include; concerts and recitals, conferences, family events, and functions that highlight student success (art shows and science fairs). "Effective parent involvement programs match the needs of the school and community in creating a positive school climate" (Barrera & Warner, 2006, p. 73). With corresponding educator and parent responses, this would be a positive, productive area to begin building parent involvement.

Question 8: Are you an active member of your school's PTA/PTO?

The respondents had the same four options to choose from as the parents/guardians group did; active member (26%), member but not active (45%), not a member (29%), and other (0%).

Descriptive Analysis II

Participating teachers range from kindergarten to fifth grade, with class sizes from 7 to 50. Classroom teachers, special teachers, and academic intervention specialists (AIS) participated in the study and all have varying experiences with parents. Reporting the importance of communication, on a scale of 1-10, educators rate the importance of home-school connection as 9.1 of 10.0. When asked if educators would like increased alternative communication, several responded with 'no', as technology assists them. Reports also note that communication, via technology in general terms, is one-sided and parents respond only when it specifically pertains to their child. Other responses focused on in-school parent involvement, not just communication. Communication seems to be extremely high in the primary grades and decreases, somewhat, in the intermediate grades. Educators were also asked what types of functions have the highest turnout in parent attendance or participation. Concerts or events

where their children are performing, curriculum nights, and parent conferences are reported to be the functions that parents attend most often.

Additional comments made by educators about communication include:

- Parents who care. I have had a few that have said they don't care
- I know it is important, but finding time and means can be challenging
- It's tough and time consuming but needs to be done to make a positive relationship with each family
- It seems that the families you most need to connect with are the families that don't return phone calls or show up to conferences
- Projects that the parents and students can work on together-they keep communication open

When analyzing the participant responses, it can be concluded that, with the use of technology in education, communication from school to home is a strength. Active parent participation needs to be increased. The home-school connection is critical in helping to improve student academics, attendance rates, and overall feelings of school importance.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the study was to determine the most effective methods for creating and strengthening a positive home-school connection as perceived by parents/guardians and educators in a suburban, public elementary school. An initial literature review emphasized the increasing number of students living in poverty, the effects of living in poverty and the need to establish a strong rapport with students' parents/guardians so as to help counteract the effects poverty has on children and their academics. Because most literature presented here focuses on students who come from urban areas and how poverty influences their physical, emotional, social and academic development, there is a need for suburban and rural research to be conducted. Overall, parental support and involvement in school activities is lower among poor parents (Gassama, 2012). Therefore, educators must "develop the competencies to engage families as partners in learning to improve student academic success" (Casper, Lopez, Chu & Weiss, 2011, p. 2).

Families feel more capable of contributing to their child's education when his/her school makes efforts to build cooperative, respectful relationship between the school's staff and families. Studies show that when the school frequently communicates with parents and offers them meaningful opportunities to be involved, parents feel more connected to their child's school. (Coalition for Community Schools, 2016).

Implications

Previously conducted research, along with the survey results, reveal common themes regarding how parents and educators perceive the home-school connection:

Theme 1: All parties see the importance of building positive relationships

Theme 2: Increased connections are wanted and technology has helped in increasing modes of communication

Theme 3: Events that highlight student achievement increases parent involvement

Theme 1: All see the importance of building positive relationships.

Reviewing all responses, it is evident that all parties see the importance of creating and fostering a positive home-school connection. While sometimes difficult to do, positive relationships assist students in multiple, meaningful ways. 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, enroll in higher-level programs, be promoted, have better social skills, show improved behavior, increased homework completion, improved school attendance, and graduate and go on to post-secondary education, and can alter attitudes and behaviors about school (Child Trends, 2013, Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, Henderson & Mapp, 2002, Jensen, 2009, McAlister, 2013, McNeal, 2014). Although all see how important this relationship is, not all implement the most effective strategies for creating and sustaining that relationship-this applies to both educators and parents. However, seeing the importance of home-school interaction is the first step needed in working towards creating the environment desired.

Theme 2: Increased connections are wanted and technology has helped to increase modes of communication.

Communication between home and school is the foundation of a solid partnership (Barrera & Warner, 2006, p. 73). As reported by both participant subgroups, increased home-school connections are desired. As students progress through grade levels, it is important for relationships to be developed early on, and maintained without suffering due to the demands of daily life. As technology continues to be a force in education, educators are turning to more modern methods of communicating with parents and guardians.

As reported in the survey, current methods used include, but are not limited to: Facebook, Google apps for education, Schoology, Remind, BuzzMob, or TeacherKit. Educators are also utilizing email and text communication in addition to traditional phone calls and sending handwritten notes home. This increase in communication methods allows parents and educators to send messages in real-time, on a variety of devices, increasing parent contact. Some applications also give parents access to student grades and teacher comments on a regular basis. Multiple methods help to increase and create a more effective and efficient flow of communication. As reported by survey respondents, the combination of methods helps to keep all parents informed of what's happening in school.

Theme 3: Events that highlight student achievement increases parent involvement.

When asked for suggestions to help increase parent presence in school, the most common recommendation received, from both groups of respondents, was to increase school events that emphasize student achievement. Adjusting programs to the specific needs of families is key to positive family-school cooperation (Barrera & Warner, 2006, p. 74).

As previously addressed, those who are struggling to make ends meet at home are focused on survival first. By creating increasing opportunities to invite parents in and celebrate student achievement, parent response increases (Meador, 2016). The community schools model, which brings together wrap-around services and a range of arts, music, academic, cultural, and other programming for students and parents during and beyond the school day, has improved family engagement and increased student well-being and achievement (Blank, Melaville & Shah 2003).

Limitations

Few limitations of the study exist, yet could play a significant role in determining emergent themes. The surveys were offered to all parents/guardians of students in kindergarten through 5th grade, roughly one thousand students. While the study focused on engaging families and encouraging greater participation, those that completed the survey seem to have established strong connections with their child's educators. Therefore, the perceptions of those respondents could be different from those who are not actively involved in the education of their students. This limitation could also pertain to older groups of students and parents. The study focused on educators and parents/guardians of students in kindergarten through grade 5. Within the study, as grade levels got higher, perceptions of participants shifted. If the pattern continued, middle and high school views would differ greatly from elementary school.

Additionally, some educator perceptions relayed negative views of parent involvement, or lack of it. A few teachers reported that the parents of their students weren't interested in establishing a rapport. Though these responses only represent a few, one could question whether the sentiments extend further than just those that reported, especially if educators at the middle or high school levels were to be invited to participate in the survey.

Conclusions and Recommendations for the Future

Parent involvement in education is important to student success. Jensen (2009) relays that “overworked, overstressed, and undereducated low-SES parents are more inclined to demonstrate a lack of interest in and neglect or negativity towards their children” (p. 86). For this reason it is important for schools to reach out to families and build a strong home-school connection, which, in turn, impacts students’ social, emotional, physical, and academic development (Jensen, 2009). Parent involvement includes communication with educators, presence in the school setting, and supporting their student(s) at home. In order for all three areas to improve, educators need to begin creating and implementing methods that encourage active involvement.

Christen and Sheridan (2001) relay that, regardless of the particular family-school-student context, the probability for positive connections to exist among the players is highest when educators expect that families will be involved, invite active family participation, include families in decisions for their children and are open to options for family involvement (p. 200). Henderson & Mapp (2002) identified a key finding, stating the continuity of family involvement at home appears to have a protective effect on children as they progress through our complex education system. The more families support their children’s learning and educational progress, the more their children tend to do well in school and continue their education. Parents play a vital role in their children’s education. It is necessary for schools to reach out and strengthen relationships as children progress through school.

Increasing communication, starting from school-based educators, needs to be the first step. Communication, in this sense, points to student-specific information. Most parents receive newsletters and blanket messages home, and while these inform parents of classroom events,

they are not personal and inviting. Educators must set the tone for positive connections between schools and families (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Parents are seeking positive communication regarding student behavior and academic achievement in school. As reported, parents are being contacted when there is an issue in school or behavior is of concern. By increasing positive communication parent reluctance may dissipate. Perkins-Gough (2008) acknowledges that parents' feelings about their child's school, whether positive or negative, influence how involved they get in school activities. Educators need to be cognizant of the relationship between positive/negative experiences and the impact they have on parent involvement.

An increase of events that highlight student achievement would assist in urging parents to engage more often in their children's activity in school. Per survey responses, parents are asking to have increased opportunities to come in to schools to celebrate student success. Music concerts, art shows, or any other function that acknowledges students are all seen as positive methods to encourage parents to visit schools. These events elicit high attendance, as they are held now. Forhan (2010) suggests making it easy to get involved, provide several options, and enjoyment is contagious, as most people want to be a part of a group that is having fun while accomplishing its goals. Creating this positive, inviting environment is crucial to getting, and keeping parents involved.

In addition to an increase of events recognizing students, parents are also asking for the opportunity to come in and learn about what their students are learning in school in order to better help them at home. Henderson and Mapp (2002) acknowledge that several studies have been completed analyzing programs and their relationship to student success. What they have established is that teacher outreach to parents was related to strong and consistent gains in

student performance in both reading and math. “Workshops for parents on helping their children at home were linked to higher reading and math scores” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 13). With the adoption of math module work and the introduction of new math methods, in New York State, parents are looking for guidance from educators so they can better assist their students at home. Barrera and Warner (2002) list this aspect of outreach as one of their collaboration strategies: involve parents by using workshops to model strategies. Additionally, they state that creative solutions, such as before or after school programs and in-home support activities, provide opportunities for parents to offer their assistance. Jensen (2013) and McAlister (2011) note the importance of building strong, long-term relationships, identify the most critical areas of need, and offer content that parents need the most.

The suggestions offered to increase parent participation are overlapping among both subgroups; increase family-style events, offer additional events that highlight student achievement, and give parents the opportunity to learn what the students are learning so they can support them at home.

Demographics are consistently shifting in school districts. As parents’ schedules often make it difficult for them to become actively involved it is necessary for educators to adapt to parent needs. Creating an open, inviting environment and communicating their willingness to be supportive of their need is vital to the success of that relationship. “To have an effect on the actions of families and educators, policies must be visible and known” (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p. 10). If the goal is to increase parent involvement, educators must be willing to do what is necessary to achieve the results they seek.

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Appendix A: Participant Role and Contribution

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Data Type</u>	<u>Information</u>
Administrators (2)	Overall family engagement at the building level	Strategies employed by the administration to encourage parent involvement. * Survey information	What has worked and what has not.
Classroom and Special Education Teachers (Classroom- 40)	Engagement of individual families at the classroom level	Methods used to entice parents/guardians to become involved in academics whether it be with specific work, conferences, or regular communication * Survey information	What has worked and what has not specific to communication types and classroom events
School based Social Workers (2)	Working with families of students with emotional needs	Effective strategies for engaging families of students with sensitive situations * Survey information	Best strategies for delicate but effective engagement
Parents/Guardians	Responding to school efforts to increase engagement	What entices them to become more involved in school * Survey responses	Can help answer what are the most effective ways schools can get families involved. What brings them to school functions and why.

Appendix B: Consent for Participation in Research

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title: *How to Engage Families in School-Based Education*

Principal Investigator(s): Jill Rich (607)-768-4215 or jrich@une.edu
Dr. Ella Benson, at (757)- 450-3628 and ebenson2@une.edu

Introduction:

- Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to identify the most effective strategies for establishing and strengthening the connection between a student's home and their school.

Who will be in this study?

You are being asked to take part because of you are an educator or a parent of elementary school children. Your reported experience with school involvement is vital to understanding the most effective strategies that schools utilize.

What will I be asked to do?

You are being asked to complete a brief survey on engagement. This survey may be completed in paper form or online. The survey contains both short answer and multiple choice questions. It will take no longer than 10 minutes to complete either version.

Your participation is voluntary and there will be no reimbursement of compensation for participating.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. There may be a benefit to others, i.e. the school district, teachers, and parents as a stronger home-school connection may be produced and engagement may increase as a result of the collected data.

What will it cost me?

There will be no cost to anyone who chooses to participate.

How will my privacy be protected?

- All participant responses will be void of personal identification, including IP addresses with the online version
- As the survey may be completed at a time and place, privacy is at the discretion of the participant.
- Results of the study will be shared with district administration and educators, if the administration so chooses. The results will also be reported to the dissertation committee with The University of New England.

How will my data be kept confidential?

- Data collection and participation are anonymous.
- This study is designed to be anonymous, this means that no one, can link the data you provide to you, or identify you as a participant.
- Research records (hard copies) will be kept in a locked safe in the locked home office of the principal investigator
- Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer, stored in the locked home office, only accessible by the principal investigator
- All collected data will be void of individually identifiable data
 - Electronic data will be void of any identifiable IP address
- Once the study is complete all collected data will be disposed of
- Please note that the Institutional Review Board may review the research records.
- A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.
- The study includes the option to complete the survey online. The survey will not store any IP address of any participant. All data will be secured, as it will be double password protected. (One for the survey data and one for the computer itself)
- Research findings may be provided to the you. if requested, in writing, to the principal investigator.

What are my rights as a research participant?

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of New England or Maine Endwell Central School District.
- To any employee that chooses to participate, participation will not impact your relationship with your employer.

- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalty to you.

What other options do I have?

- You may choose not to participate.

Whom may I contact with questions?

- The researcher conducting this study is Ms. Jill Rich. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact me at 607-768-4215 and jrich@une.edu
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Dr. Ella Benson at (757)- 450-3628 and ebenson2@une.edu
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Participant's signature or
Legally authorized representative

Date

Printed name

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Researcher's signature

Date

Printed name