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Building an effective one-on-one working relationship between middle school teachers and parents: What are the steps of learning for teachers?

By

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Abstract

The topic of parental involvement has been widely studied but within the topic, the area of training teachers to work with parents has not. The training and preparation for teachers to work with parents are scarce and at times, non-existent. The primary purpose of this study is to examine effective middle school teachers about the steps on their path of learning to work effectively with parents. The study also included middle student teachers that shared their needs in learning how to work with parents. The study focused on interviewing highly successful middle school teachers in the area of working with parents. The first part of the study involved 18 semi-structured interviews with teachers who were recommended by their building administrators because the administrators have first hand information about the expert teachers in the area of working with parents. The second part of the study involved focus group interviews with middle school student teachers that shared their experiences, training and materials to learn to work with parents effectively in a university setting. Several homogeneous focus groups were established based on the SES (socio-economic status) level of schools where the student teachers were assigned. Data were analyzed and the results included eight categories that impacted the steps of learning for middle school teachers to work with parents: amount of training, methods of learning, personal experiences, communication tools, approaches to communication, teachers' beliefs, support for teachers and suggestions for future training. The steps on the path of learning for teachers to work with parents were clearly established. Almost all teachers start with little to no training in the university as an undergraduate student. Often, teachers begin their first teaching position unprepared to work with parents. Therefore, they are left with a few methods of

learning by being mentored, being observant and, unfortunately, trial and error as well. Moreover, teachers drew from their personal experiences ranging from being parents to doing other types of jobs. On the other hand, teachers learn to utilize the variety of communication tools that are widely available at most schools but the effectiveness of teachers comes from the wisdom in the usage of the communication tools for specific purposes. These steps of learning are supported by teacher's own beliefs and approaches to communication. Furthermore, regardless of a teacher's specific path of learning, he/she requires support and resources including administrators, counselors, teachers, other support staff and time. Finally, the participants gave suggestions for the purpose of improving training for future teachers.

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I would like to thank my dissertation committee for their time, devotion, energy, expertise and guidance. Special thank you to my committee chair, Dr. Kathleen S. Brown, for believing in me from the beginning and supporting me throughout my ten-year endeavor. Her wisdom, patience, honest conversations and meticulous edits were immensely helpful to me. Thank you to Dr. Wolfgang Althof for his expertise in methodology. I deeply appreciate that he constantly demanded the best from me and yet he was always willing to teach me and help me advance my thinking skills. I will fondly remember his sense of humor while addressing my errors. I also want to thank Dr. Ken Owen for his knowledge in middle school and in administration. His quiet support behind the scenes was always timely and needed. In addition, Dr. Carole Murphy was more than gracious in agreeing to be on my committee late in the process due to unforeseen circumstances. Together, I could not have asked for a better balance and combination of professors for my learning, growth and success.

I am equally grateful for friends and family who never waver in their believe in me. Thank you to my friends who shared in my passion and desire to improve teacher education, especially in the area of working with parents. Thank you to my bosses and colleagues at work for their sense of humor and patience during the last ten years while I taught and studied. Thank you to all of the servers at the cafes that I frequent during my writing process, for their kindness towards me during my high-stress moments. Thank you to my close knit circle of "my people" who continued to push me forward even when I ran out of energy and desire to go on. Thank you especially to my family who never gave up on me and put up with everything that I asked for. A big thanks to my

students and my own teachers/professors (current and former), who reminded me of the importance of being a life time learner and inspire me each day to give more to the teaching profession. Most of all, thank you God for your ever presence, grace, faithfulness and never forsaking me even in my struggles. It is my hope that my research, my involvement and my passion for teaching and learning will allow me to serve God and serve others effectively in my life.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many research studies have been conducted in the United States to explore best practices in the education of our youth. Topics of these studies include class size, curriculum, technology, teacher quality, physical learning environment, creativity, structure, teaching pedagogy, teacher training, parental involvement and many more. Scholars have studied all levels of education, including early childhood, elementary, middle, high school and post-secondary. Parental involvement in elementary schools is a topic that has been heavily studied in particular, school-wide involvement. However, the specific working relationship between individual teachers and parents has not always been a topic of interest for researchers. The research on how to train teachers learn to work with parents is scarce. Yet according to Hargreaves (2001), "Parents today are often exalted as teachers' best partners and one of their most underused resources." (p. 373) From my experience, I agree wholeheartedly. Not only are parents an under-utilized resource, they potentially are also the most effective yet mostly overlooked resource by teachers. After all, parents are the backbone and support system in most children's lives. While this particular topic has gained some increased attention and momentum in the last couple of decades, teachers are generally under-trained to work effectively with parents. This study examined effective working relationships between teachers and parents at the middle school level and identified the steps on the path of learning for teachers in the area of working with parents.

With my own background of over two decades of teaching experiences in various middle schools (including a range of socio-economic characteristics, expectations and policies), I have observed a great yet commonly unmet need in middle schools. This observed need challenges teachers in the area of working with parents who tend to struggle with understanding how to support and work effectively with their child's teachers, particularly in middle school. Most parents, predominantly those parenting teenagers for the first time, are anxious, frustrated and unsure about what is happening to their child as he/she enters the ever-volatile world of teens. Parents frequently witness physical, emotional and social changes in their children and often depend on teacher's help with navigating these difficult years. Unfortunately, the help is not always offered or available even if parents ask for it, which is a sharp contrast to the culture that I came from.

Personal background

Born and educated in Asia, I was raised in a culture where education is almost always the number one priority. As a child, I had an exceptionally close lens for observing education as a priority because I have a father who was a seasoned high school principal and I visited his school regularly. While attending a variety of schools (private kindergarten, all-girls private school in early elementary and a co-ed public school from upper elementary through middle school), I witnessed the roles of both parents and teachers in a number of different school settings. Even in a variety of schools, adult members (both teachers and parents) were very clear about their roles in educating children. Little blaming exists between parents or teachers. In general, teachers were

expected to give and provide knowledge and accountability to academic learning; to build children's work habits and to secure acceptable behavior; while parents had the role of supporting teachers from the home front with whatever was necessary to contribute positively to their children's education process. Often, that support included good health-related habits such as proper nutrition, appropriate bedtime, adequate physical activities, commitment to studies and homework, tutors, removal of unnecessary distractions, high expectations and most importantly, parental accountability. The combination of the school and home support often produced highly motivated, successful, compliant and healthy students.

In Asia, both teachers and parents have clearly defined roles and goals. In contrast, the thirty years that I have been in the United Stated, I have found that the difference in parental involvement warrants some academic and research focus. Parental involvement in the United States is culturally undefined. The roles and goals of both parents and teachers are vague, poorly defined and up for debate, thus they call for considerable research. The cultural and environmental differences between American and Asian families include the respective roles of parents and teachers, the mutual respect of both parents' and teachers' authority, home expectations, school expectations, academic and social behaviors, age-appropriate boundaries, homework load, definition of work and play, meal times and time commitment towards education, to name a few. I have experienced both in my personal and professional lives.

Professional experiences

My professional experiences as well as my academic studies have helped me conclude that parental involvement is typically deeper and occurs at a greater level of frequency at the elementary than at the middle school or high school level. At the elementary level, students generally, have mostly one teacher and this allows for more regular, expansive and deeper communication between parents and teachers. Parents also tend to be more involved in homework, assist more with organizational and study behaviors, be more present at school and tend to set more defined rules and expectations. To be fair, parents are also more welcomed by both teachers and students at that age.

During my twenty-three years of teaching in middle schools, I have observed and experienced a multitude of students who are experiencing adolescence. As we know from adolescent development (Normal adolescent development, 2012), this is a time when youth strive for independence, tend to be more impulsive in their actions, and liable to defy both parent and teacher authority more. Parents become less hands-on with tasks like homework, organizational skills, and time management. On the one side, parents want to encourage their child to be independent but on the other side, they want to provide guidance and assistance. Some parents are filled with frustrations and take a hands-off approach in order to keep peace with their teenagers. For a combination of reasons, parental involvement starts to take on a smaller role in middle school. Unfortunately, while many parents of middle school students desire to be more effective with parenting adolescents, they lack the skills and knowledge to do so. Middle school parents sometimes are willing to admit that they simply do not know what to do, therefore, parental involvement for middle school age students needs to take on a

different composition rather than simply be missing. In addition, middle school is normally the first time when a student (and his/her parents) experience having multiple teachers, particularly in the core subject areas. Parents struggle with how to stay effectively and appropriately engaged in their child's education in this new setting. In addition, social pressures become more prevalent during adolescence. It is very common that an elementary student would likely be glad to see his or her parents involved in classroom or school activities while middle school student would probably prefer that their parents not be seen at school.

Parents often need more guidance from their children's middle school educators. Largely due to rapid growth and development, it is logical to struggle in the seasons of parenthood during early childhood as well as the early teen years. There are many parallels between early childhood and early adolescence. During both stages, there is significant physical growth accompanied by cognitive and emotional development as well. It is not always easy for parents of adolescents to differentiate between normal/temporary teenage behaviors and abnormal/long-term and perhaps even harmful behavior. As a teacher, I have found that having a solid working relationship with parents lead to the solutions and improvements in many areas of concerns for students. For example, when I contact a parent about an academic concern, it will often lead to a conversation that includes discussions on personal responsibilities, emotional growth and other topics that are unexpected yet relevant. At the very least, parents usually appreciate being informed about their student's progress as well as getting a sense that their child's teacher is concerned. Sadly, teachers are notoriously untrained and ill prepared to work with parents and even our most seasoned and talented teachers struggle in this area. The

constant negative portrayals of education and teachers from the mass media only add to the overall distrust of parents. Additionally, middle school teachers who have 80-130 students often do not have adequate time and are not able to give the same attention to parents to the same degree as their elementary colleagues who usually only have 18-25 students. Therefore, even teachers who have the best intentions to work with parents struggle in this area of their jobs. It is logical to reform teacher preparation programs specifically in the area of working with parents in order to meet the needs of both students and their parents, especially in this ever-changing society.

Research studies

Above and beyond my own background, education, interest and teaching experiences, numerous research studies have substantiated the positive impact that an effective working relationship between teachers and parents had on student achievement (Epstein 1996; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1997; Moles 1987; Hiatt-Michael 2001; Henderson & Mapp 2002; Jeynes 2005; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy & Weiss 2008). As a result, the time to debate the merits of parental involvement, particularly in middle school, has passed and the new focus must be on how teachers learn to do a better job in working with parents effectively. Even though there is a considerable amount of research in the area of parental involvement, there is barely any research in the area of training teachers to do a better job in building an effective working relationship with parents. Within that minuscule amount of research on training teachers to work with parents, there is next to nothing known specifically about training middle school teachers.

While research studies undeniably supported the need for teachers to be better equipped in order to work with parents/families, the majority of those studies are conducted in elementary school settings (Scales, 1992; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Some studies are based on parental involvement in high school; but in middle school, the research in parental involvement is clearly insufficient (Singh, Bickley, Keith, Keith, Trivette & Anderson, 1995). Likewise, studies on school-wide parental involvement dominate the research. Specific studies on the working relationship between teachers and parents are in its infancy (Lazar & Slostad 1999), which only complicate matters. Consequently, until we examine and study what is needed in order to help prepare teachers (specifically middle school teachers) to do a better job with involving parents, parents will continue to be a highly valued yet continually under utilized, ignored and avoided resource in the American education system (Lazar, Broderick, Mastrilli & Slostad 1999).

Middle-schoolers need autonomy and independence but at the same time, they also need comfort, connectedness, accountability and the feeling that adults care about them both in school and at home. Unfortunately, the research evidence shows a steady decline in parental involvement often beginning in middle school (Beyth-Marom, Fischoff, Jacobs & Furby, 1989 Council of Adolescent Development, 1989 & 1996). Even more alarming, the decline in parental involvement seemed to be most drastic and apparent in middle school (Billig, 2002). One of the main factors for the decline in middle school student performance is the decrease of parental involvement (Bermudez, 2000). These studies suggested a positive correlation between the decline of parental involvement and the decline of student achievement.

Although research studies point out that even when middle school students pushed their parents away from being involved, privately teenage students do wish for and depend on their parents to stay involved.   On the surface, adolescents want to seem independent and grown up yet deep down inside, they know they need parental support and guidance. These are just a few examples of the reasons for middle school teachers and parents to join forces and support each other. As a result, one of the most important parts of a middle school teacher's job is to work with parents on how best to help students gain success in their academic, social and emotional development. Findings by Hafen & Laursen (2009) suggest that adolescent problems drive changes in the quality of parent/child relationship but the parent support does not drive changes in early adolescent behavior. For example, if a middle school student starts to lie about his/her academic work, parents would likely have to make some changes in boundaries, rules, expectations and consequences in order to help the adolescent regain his/her focus. This type of interaction usually puts a strain on the parent/child relationship even though it is for the good of the child. Parents/guardians who do not have trusted family members or friends who work with this age group in some capacity (e.g. teacher, counselor, psychologist, social worker), their resources in regard to the middle school age student are either slim with little support or overwhelmingly broad with no specific direction except from mass media. Additional, when parents make decisions based on parental peer pressure rather than age appropriate rationale, the best interest of children is not served. The combination of these factors makes it highly difficult for parents to know for certain if they are doing the right thing for their early teenage child. One of the more stable and common resources for parents are the professionals at their child's middle school.

It is clear that more research in the area of improving one-on-one parental involvement in middle school is needed. Currently, there are three main centers in the United States that focus on studying the practice of parental involvement. These centers are The Institute for Responsive Education at Boston University; The National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University and the Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) at Harvard University. These three universities have, so far, produced the most promising research and data in the reform of parental involvement. Progress has been both encouraging and promising. Nevertheless, the training of teachers to work effectively with parents continues to be a topic without definitive and solid answers. The working relationship between middle school teachers and parents is a complex phenomenon at best. Neither teachers in middle schools, administrators within the school structure or university researchers know definitely how to systematically improve this working relationship. The problem is multifaceted for even if we found the answers to how we can better train teachers, it will still take time to secure funding, change program demands, update state and federal requirements, find suitable and qualified professors and make cultural adjustments. The literature review in chapter two will further examine the underline issues that plague parental involvement in middle school, in particular, historical perspective of parental involvement; student achievement; building trust; communication; building efficacy; parental involvement practices in middle school; per-service teacher training; in-service teacher training; administrator training and parent training.

Theoretical Framework

Caspe and Lopez (2006) created a concept called *Complementary Learning*. This concept happens when two or more groups such as family, school, church, community, associations and organizations (i.e. boys scouts, little league teams, music ensembles, youth groups) purposefully connect with each other for the purpose of improving learning and development for the youth. The Complementary learning concept demonstrates that families and schools are fundamental to the growth and outcomes of children. The emphasis on this framework is "purposeful" which means the connection between groups must happen with planning and with intentional effort and not simply by chance. This concept is also based on the belief that families as well as schools both make a difference in the life of the youth academically, socially and emotionally. This concept has shown that family strengthening programs have a positive impact in four main parental involvement processes: family involvement, parent-child relationship, parenting and family involvement in learning both at home and at school. This framework necessitates the effective and solid working relationship between teachers and parents.

Statement of the Problem

In today's education environment, teachers are bombarded with a host of new concerns that are above and beyond the traditional concerns such as reading, writing, math and basic behavior expectations. Even though the traditional concerns still exist, nowadays, teachers face additional concerns such as new family structures, technology invasions and innovations, societal and cultural changes, the changes in expectations of parents and of teachers, new laws and policies, multiple facets of media influences,

political correctness rather than educational soundness, the lack of appropriate

boundaries, newly diagnosed special needs and medicating children. To complicate the

problem, the added pressure of standardized test scores has altered the focus and essence

of education. Both parents and teachers have little choice but to pay more attention to

testing rather than the education of the whole child. There are few options because both

schools and students are often judged and evaluated by those official scores and records.

It has no doubt changed the demands on the school systems and therefore, on teachers.

Possible domino effects are the lesser focus on social and emotional needs of children,

the neglect of specific learning needs, the change in school funding, the change in

demands of teachers' time and priorities and the change in communication between

school and home simply because no one can escape the reality of a test-focused education

system. Nearly all of these changes that teachers face today connect to the changes in

parenting as well; therefore, it is imperative that teachers receive appropriate and

adequate training in order to be effective with educating students and working with

parents under the new demands.

No matter what the issues are, at the center of it all is the triangular relationship

between the parental/home unit (father, mother, both or guardian), the students and their

teachers. Just like the angle measurements within a triangle (180 degrees), when one of

the measurement changes, it is bound to change the other angles and measurements of

this triangular relationship. For example, when there is appropriate support between

parents and teachers, a student will have a more balanced and solid education. This

triangular relationship would resemble an equilateral/equiangular triangle (60-60-60

degrees), which is the most stable of all triangles in strength and in balance. However, if

either parents or teachers neglect to contribute their appropriate support, it will resemble more of a 20-20-140 degree triangle where the student will end up carrying an inappropriate load for his/her education. This considerably narrower triangle will reflect an inappropriate stretch of a student's responsibility for his/her own learning at their age and stage of development. Furthermore, if parents are uninvolved and the teachers end up carrying most of the load, the triangle will once again be an extreme scalene triangle, which will not be the optimal balance for all three groups that are involved. On the other hand, parents need appropriate information, professional guidance and support especially from middle school teachers to navigate through the treacherous early teen years. Teachers need appropriate information and support from home to properly educate a student. It has even been suggested in various research studies that active parental involvement as well as parental expectations are more influential in student achievement than any socio-economic factor (Hawes & Plourde, 2005).

Therefore, it is both logical and sensible to pursue a study that would allow us to move forward in parental involvement with the help of concrete training for teachers, particularly in middle school. After all, parental involvement is directly linked to positive student achievement. The catalyst to true parental involvement begins with building an effective one-on-one working relationship between teachers and parents. The end result is increased student achievement and perhaps the ultimate goal is a working relationship between home and school that best promotes and supports the development and learning of the whole child, particularly in the middle school years.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to ask the expert teachers about their experiences, training, materials, events and resources that helped them learn to work more effectively with parents and also helped them encourage appropriate and effective parent involvement. The study focused on interviewing highly successful middle school teachers who were recommended by their building administrators because they have first hand information about these expert teachers in the area of working with parents and analyzing their training, experiences and best practices. The second part of the research focused on the experience, training, materials and events that prepared middle school students for their first classroom teaching experience. Several homogeneous focus groups were established to collect the data. Furthermore, all in-service and pre-service teachers were asked to share relevant documents that pertained to their parental involvement practices.

This study concentrated on collecting qualitative data that will supply concrete and practical information about the path of learning on building an effective working relationship between middle school teachers and parents. After all, the end goal of this research is not only to improve the working relationship between teachers and parents; it is also to improve student achievement in the long run. With the United Stated often in the middle or even lower middle quadrant of the international rankings (OECD 2010; Department of Education, 2010) student learning and achievement must become a greater priority not only for teachers and parents but also for our entire nation. With more effective training for teachers to build a solid working relationship with parents, the hope is ultimately the improvement of student achievement in the United States.

Research Question

This study aims to answer the following research question:

Building an effective working relationship with parents: What are the steps of

learning for middle school teachers?

The answers to this research question will provide a set of qualitative data that

will generate a list of steps on the path of learning for middle school teachers to work

with parents more effectively.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is the potential contribution to the theory and

practice of what middle-school teachers need to learn to work effectively with parents

and thus improve outcomes for students. Due to the notable changes in the increasingly

diverse population, social environment, political climate, the economy and demands in

education in the United States over the last several decades, the practices in education

must change in order to continue to educate our children effectively. Building effective

working relationships between teachers and parents is one area that needed focus and

change because not only is the relationship particularly at risk from elementary to middle

school, it has also been shown to consistently have a positive correlation with student

achievement. Notably, family dynamics have changed significantly in a relatively short

period of time while the economy and the transformations in global demands have

changed drastically as well; therefore, the approaches and needs both in the education

system and in parenting have also changed. The history of education, family dynamics

and state and federal government involvement in education have shifted over the years; therefore, the practice of how teachers work with families must also be altered in order to meet the changing needs and be effective.

Few traditional approaches in working with families remain effective. As an example, teachers who are only equipped to work with typical traditional families (i.e. one father and one stay-at-home mother and some biological siblings) will no longer be equipped or be effective with many families. On the other hand, the desire in parents to see their children succeed in school remains important and for some families, the number one priority. To complicate the matter, the studies that specifically pertain to training middle school teachers to work with parents is minimal. We have a new generation of parents with different boundaries, needs, challenges, goals and expectations in terms of working with schools. For years, the SES (socio-economic status) of the household was the best predictor of a child's chances of success in school. In many ways, SES is still a very strong, and often the standard predictor for student achievement. However, Hawes and Plourde (2005) indicated that family involvement is an even more powerful and accurate predictor. The expectations and influence from homes are what matters most in a child's education and long-term success. The correlation between SES and family involvement suggested that high SES households tend to have parents who are successful and therefore, have high expectations for their children's achievement. However, income level is not the only factor that impacted parental involvement and expectations. Effective teachers, appropriate curriculum, increased technology and other factors are indeed important but none compared to the significance of parental involvement. As a native born Asian, I can personally attest to the fact that the home training and

expectations are the hallmarks of the success of many Asian-American students. In addition, teachers who are considered to be outstanding are generally the ones who have solid working relationships with families (Hiatt-Michael, 2004). Teachers need new training in order to effectively work with parents. Research studies have shown that teachers lack sufficient training in working with parents (Hiatt-Michael, 2004, Markow & Cooper, 2008). In order to have effective training in the long run, research studies must first be conducted to find out how teachers learn to be effective in their work with parents. This particular study was focused specifically on the steps of learning of middle school teachers who are effective in their work with parents.

In every study, there are limitations and delimitations. The purpose of limitations is to shape the interpretation of the study by constraining the generalizability and application of the results from which the chosen design of the study was used to establish internal and external validity. On the other hand, the purpose of delimitations is to establish boundaries for the study.

<div align="center">Limitations of the Study</div>

The limitations of this study consisted of:

a. I only interviewed middle school teachers

    i. I did not interview early childhood, elementary, high school teachers or university professors

    ii. I only interviewed teachers who were willing to participate in the study (interest and/or stipend)

    iii. I did not observe teachers at their schools

   iv. I only interviewed public school teachers

   v. These teachers were selected based on their principal's

    recommendation as being highly effective in parental involvement

 b. I only interviewed middle school student teachers only

   i. The focus group included only middle school student teachers

    from various local universities

   ii. The focus group included only student teachers who were willing

    to participate in the study

   iii. I did not observe student teachers at their schools

   iv. The focus group included only student teachers who were

    currently/just completed (within the standard academic year)

    student teaching in general education at a middle school

   v. No special education student teachers were included

 c. Public schools only

   i. Suburban and urban schools only

   ii. I did not select any samples from private, charter, magnet or rural

    schools

 d. Population sample size and region

   i. Participants were limited to a sample of 18 expert teachers

    interviews and 2-7 student teachers in each of the focus groups

   ii. Participants were limited to teachers in the mid-west region

   iii. Participants were limited to general education educators

Delimitations of the study

The delimitations of this study consisted of:

a. I will only examined communication tools

    i. No textbooks were examined

    ii. No school schedules were examined

    iii. No after-school activities were examined

    iv. No non-communication technology were examined

b. I only interviewed teachers and I did not interview school counselors, special school district teachers, teacher aides, district administrators, building administrators, non-faculty staff members, parents, or students.

c. I only examined teacher (participant) provided documents. I did not examine district policies, program of study, syllabi, curriculum related documents, in-school policies, Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) materials, student work, or individual student records.

Operational definition of terms

These terms are defined for the purpose of this study only

Administrator

The person(s) responsible for the management of the school. It is a term that is interchangeably used to refer to building principals and assistant principals. None are district administrator.

Communication

The exchange of information between teachers and parent by means of speaking, writing or using a common system or signs or particular behaviors (Emails, newsletters, conferences, phone calls…etc.)

Effective working relationship between teachers and parents

The working relationship between specific teachers and parents for the purpose of student achievements.

Elementary school

Schools that educate students from kindergarten to either 5th or 6th grade

High school

Schools that educate students from 9th to 12th grade

High socio-economic status household

Households of 4 or more earning over $80,000 per year. (Income, 2011).

In-service teacher

Certified teacher who is employed by a school district with an official teaching assignment and contract.

Low socio-economic status household

Households of 4 or more earning below $40,000 per year. (Income, 2011).

Middle school

Schools that educate students from 5th or 6th grade to 8th grade.

Medium socio-economic status household

Households of 4 or more earning between $40,000 to $80,000 per year. (Income, 2011).

One-on-one parent and teacher working relationship

The working relationship between a particular teacher and a particular parent of a given student. This is above and beyond or in place of all school-wide involvement.

Parents

The adult(s) who have legal responsibilities over a minor. (This includes biological father, mother, legal guardian, adoptive- parents, foster care parents and state mandated adult relative who is a caregiver). It is NOT a term that is meant to only refer to a set of biological father and mother.

Parents' role

The expectations and responsibilities that parents (adults who have legal home responsibilities) have in a student's education.

Parental involvement

Broadly speaking, all classroom or school-wide involvement. It is mostly physical presence and volunteer work at school. It may or may not also include a working relationship with teachers.

Pre-service teacher

A student teacher who has never been officially certified or employed by a public school district with an official teaching assignment and contract.

Principal's role

The expectations and responsibilities that principals have in a student's education process including the supervision and training of teachers.

Professional development

Training, workshops or programs that have the purpose of providing both in-service

teachers and principals with additional training professionally in a specific area of interest

or concern.

Socio-economic status

Commonly conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is

often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation.

Student teacher

A student who is studying in an education program at a university and who is

participating in the practicum for teaching.

Teachers

Certified educators who are responsible in a given school for the direct instruction of

academic materials to students.

Teacher's role

The expectations and responsibilities that teachers have in a student's education process.

Training

Education that is meant to teach or enhance a specific skill area.

Summary: Organization of the Study

This dissertation included five chapters and the current chapter one is the

introduction and the organization of the study. It included the introduction, personal

background, professional background, research studies, theoretical framework, statement

of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study,

limitations of the study, delimitations of the study, definition of terms and the description

of the organization of the study. The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the

entire study.

Chapter two synthesized the related area of literature and research studies that led

to the purpose and need for this study. It began with an introduction followed by an

overview of research literature on parental involvement. The review included an overall

search under the topic of parental involvement; the changes in the history of education in

the United States; student achievement; trust; communication; efficacy; middle school,

and the training of pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, administrator and parents.

The purpose of this chapter was to synthesize the research studies and shape the missing

element that will support the study of the path of learning for teachers to work effectively

with parents.

Chapter three on the methodology consisted of a introduction, research methods,

research questions, procedures, interview questions for semi-structured interviews

questions, focus group interview questions, population, participants, data collection,

validity, confidentiality and data analysis procedure. The purpose of the chapter is to

outline the methods of the study, break down data collection and delineate the analysis

procedure.

Chapter four will report the findings from the data collected. The purpose of this

chapter is to examine the data and report results from the study.

Chapter five will include the discussion within the results of the study, discussion

of the results as they relate to the literature, quality standards, limitations, delimitations,

and recommendations for further studies. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize

and provide suggestions for the future studies in this academic field.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The task of educating today's youth is a complex one at best and with the ever-changing world, especially within the last few decades, technology, social and media influences, cultural values, political correctness, government policies, shifts in family structure and the needs of schools and students have also shifted. One important thing that has not changed is the positive impact of parental influence on student achievement.

A brief history of education in America for the last sixty years

In the past two and a half centuries, the United States government has increased its role and involvement in education by the establishment of public education, supporting public schools with federal and state money and improving the quality of education (Stark, 1999). In recent decades, the federal government has given its share of focus specifically to schools and parents. This focus began in phases from the 1960's with President Johnson's Head Start program to involve parents from early childhood, followed by the 1975 Individuals with Disabilities ACT (IDEA) where parents of students with special needs were required to be active partners. There was a brief decrease in parental involvement in the early 1980's with President Carter's 1979 Education Organization Act. However, education reform since the mid 1980's has shifted from a focus on teaching to a focus on student achievement (Markow & Cooper, 2008). With President Clinton's Improving America's Schools ACT of 1994 (IASA), the

momentum of parental involvement regained its pace. This policy encouraged parents

and teachers to pledge to work together for education equality and student success. As

we entered the 21st century, President Bush established the federal policy NCLB (No

Child Left Behind) that mandated the involvement of parents (Hutchins, 2008). In 2012,

President Obama planned to spend approximately 30 billion dollars to support ESEA

(Elementary and Secondary Education Act) (Department of Education, 2011).

Historically, the United States has spent more funds per student than most other

countries yet our student achievement is currently ranked in the middle of the pack

internationally. Many international reports have ranked the achievement of United States

students in the teens among the developed nations. As an example, Program for

International Student Assessment (PISA), which studies 15 year-olds among 70 countries

internationally, reported in 2001 that the United States ranked 15th in reading, 19th in

mathematics and 14th in science. A decade later, PISA 2010 reported the United States

currently ranks 14th in reading, 25th for mathematics and 17th for science. PISA is just

one example among many similar international education reports. These reports

indicated similar types of concerns in the lack of student achievement in the United States

in global comparisons (OECD, 2001 & 2010). Therefore, student learning and

achievement have been a negative media topic with little encouraging news to report.

The status quo of education has provided few promises for any significant rising of the

achievement level of students. Although teachers are more educated than ever in the

history of this country, student achievement continues to decline (Ravitch, 2003).

Improving education is noticeably a constant topic in the national media, schools

across the country, and local communities. Clearly, there is a sense of dissatisfaction

with the education system among the general population as well as the ones who are in power. Although there have been numerous reforms, policies and mandates, something needs to change and/or replace the current practice and focus in education.

Promising Solutions

Numerous topics have been researched and studied with mixed results but parental involvement has been shown to increase student achievement. In the research studies on parental involvement, there are definite and positive correlations and some potential solid answers to the improvement of student achievement. The bonus is parental involvement could change other behaviors of parents and students both at home and at school. Therefore, parental involvement, in the form of the working relationship between teachers and parents, has to be a large part of the process of improving student achievement. Although research clearly showed that the working relationship between teachers and parents is vital to students' success, in reality, it is challenging to accomplish and maintain. Factually, the opportunities for dialogue and collaboration occur infrequently (Epstein, 1984, 1987; Chavkin & Williams, 1989; Deslandes, Royer, Bertrand & Tourcotte, 1997; Henderson & Wilcox, 1998; Turner, 2000; Markow & Martin, 2005; Epstein 2007; Porto 2007).

A large research study conducted by MetLife (2005) titled *The American Teacher*, surveyed 800 new teachers and provided some insights to the challenges of parental involvement. The report stated that communicating and involving parents to be teachers' biggest challenge (Markow & Martin, 2005). Some of the most important findings in this major study were:

- Only 25% of the new teachers described their relationship with parents as satisfactory

- Parental involvement was an even bigger challenge for teachers who are working with low-income, minority students. The percent of teachers who felt that way went up from 25% to 40%.

- New teachers pointed out that they felt least prepared to engage families in order to support the students' education

- Out of six areas of challenges for teachers (communication with parents, getting resources and materials, maintaining discipline in the classroom, preparing students for testing, getting guidance and support and others), communicating with parents ranked as the highest challenges at 31%.

- Engaging parents in supporting students' education ranks as the least prepared area also for new teachers

- Only 6% of new teachers felt well prepared to work with parents

In a follow up study, 2008 MetLife Survey of *The American Teacher*, a sample of 1,000 K-12 teachers were interviewed over the phone for an average of 16 minutes each. (Markow & Cooper, 2005). The large study also provided the body of literature on parental involvement with some new data. Some of the most important findings in this major study were:

- About half of teachers identified lack of support or help from parents as a serious hindrance to students' ability to learn.

- Concerns about recruitment, retention and morale of American's teachers

- Teachers concerns about the quality of home-school relationships.

- Teachers see improvements in school relationships with parents, but also rate lack of parental support as a major, continuing challenge to student achievement.

- More teachers (67%) than in 1984 (54%) rate parental and community support for their school as good or excellent.

- A larger proportion of principals (70%) and teachers (63%) agree that relations between parents and schools have improved in recent years.

This 2008 MetLife survey showed that parental support has improved slightly, yet The Consortium for Policy Research in Education and the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy found that 40-50% teachers and even master teachers who loved their job left the profession because of the challenges from parents (Gibbs, 2005). This led to a logical question as to cause of this trend.

Parental Involvement: an expected positive behavior

Many factors contribute to the success or failure of building a solid and effective working relationship between individual teachers and individual parents and these relationships are ever changing. Historically, parental involvement in the United States has been generally regarded as a prudent, responsible and positive. As discussed in chapter one (p.19-22), many things have changed in the world and those changes have made parental involvement a different phenomenon in the last few decades. The definitions of parental involvement and role expectations of both parents and teachers have changed and what those roles should be is cloudy at best. Additionally, due to many

transformations in society and other factors that have evolved over the years, the nature of the working relationship between parents and teachers has changed as well as between the institutions of family and school (Coleman, 1987; Hutchins 2008). One example of change is the change in family structure. Most teachers are taught to deal with English speaking, dual heterosexual parents, and stay-at-home mom as the norm of family make up. Nowadays, family make up can be from divorced, never married single parents, mothers working outside of the home, homosexual couples and single adoptive parents. Consequently, the need for frequent studies of this vital working relationship is present as parental involvement is one of the few promising areas that have been positively correlated to student achievement. The positive correlations include raising test scores, academic success, increased attendance and more (Epstein 2005; Sheldon, 2007). Though parental involvement is not the perfect, magical solution to the nation's education issues, it has been cited as four times more influential by age 16 than socio-economic background, which was the previous gold standard in predicting student achievement (Heine, 2009). Therefore, in order for parental involvement to be a viable and practical solution to student achievement, additional research studies must take place for any significant changes to transpire.

Three-part literature review

Literature review is not simply a way to justify the study itself, it is also a process in which the researcher will narrow the scope of the research and hence, develop the research question for the study (Thomas, 2009, p.61). Looking into the literature, much of the research under the topic of general parental involvement was focused on school-

wide involvement (concert attendance, volunteer in the classroom, fundraising, parent/teacher conference) rather than the specific aspects of the working relationships between individual teachers and parents. The majority of the research studies were also focused on elementary school, and some with high schools, but few were specifically with middle school. Therefore, the answer to the cause of teachers struggling to work with parents is not a simple one to answer.

In preparation for this research study, a three-part literature review was conducted. Since the topic of parental involvement is so broad in the literature, this researcher felt necessary to conduct a general search of the topic as the first part and then narrowing the scope of the review later. A list of ten factors emerged as a result of part I of the literature review as factors that impacted with parental involvement. The purpose of this part was to identify factors that either positively or negatively impacted parental involvement. Within this general first part of the review, the most clear, dominant and over-arching theme is parental involvement has direct and positive impact on student achievement (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood & Weinfeld, 1966; Henderson, 1988; Larocque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011). In addition to that direct impact, there are some additional benefits such as increased school attendance (Sheldon, 2007), positive attitude towards learning (Comer & Haynes, 1991), better test scores (Desimone, 1999) and increased academic success (Bempechat, 1990).

The second part of literature review was focused on the changes in parental involvement over the decades. The purpose of this part was to investigate the history of parental involvement because the changes over time not only supported the need to further study the topic of parental involvement, but also the incorporation of appropriate

practices in the engagement of parents into teachers' daily work. Parental involvement has a relatively short history beginning with the passing of compulsory education law in 1852. At that time of history, parents and teachers were considered equal and the culture was to work together for the benefit of children (Dodd & Konzal, 2000). However, it has changed considerably over the last one hundred sixty years. Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), schools are held accountable not only for performance but also for parental involvement. Now that parental involvement is a requirement, both formally and informally, it is even more pressing that teachers get additional training to achieve a better working relationship with parents. This is no different than getting educated on teaching methods because sound pedagogy in teaching is expected. Sadly, this expectation to work with parents effectively is often not viewed and treated with the same priority. In reality, teachers simply do not get the training or necessarily have a strong sense of responsibility for one of the most vital parts of their job.

The purpose of part three review of the literature was devoted specifically to the training and the various factors that impacted the training of teachers as well as their work with parents. This was a logical progression because from the ten main factors that impacted the working relationship between parents and teachers, teacher training seemed to be the reasonable focus in order for any significant changes to take place. Since there was virtually no research specifically on training teachers to work with parents, it was necessary to review all of the related components such as communication and building trust.

In addition, there were two main challenges in the literature review. First, attempts have been made to define, measure, study and evaluate the definition of parental

involvement in various studies with little success. Second, even though there were many studies that pointed out the importance of parental involvement, particularly in relation to student achievement as well as working with parents being a high stress concern for teachers, there was little literature specifically on training teachers to work with parents.

Part I

In part one of the literature review, research studies clearly indicated that an effective working relationship between parents and teachers is vital and necessary for student success, but in reality, this relationship does not occur nearly as often as it should. Within this part of the general literature review in parental involvement, *ten* factors that impact the working relationship between parents and teachers were identified. The ten factors served as possible explanations for the infrequency of solid working relationship between parent and teacher:

- The changes in the needs of parents and teachers- a historical perspective (Culter, 2000; Hutchins, 2008).

- The absence of a common and agreed working definition for parental involvement (Renihan & Renihan 1995; Simmons, 2002; Miretsky, 2004; Witmer, 2005; Anderson & Minke, 2007).

- The lack of clarity of roles for parents, teachers and principals (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Phelps, 1999; Belendardo, 2001; Galinsky, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler, Green & Walker, 2007).

- The voices of concerns from parents and teachers do not always correlate (Dodd 1998; Upham, Cheney & Manning, 1998; Ramirez, 2000; Mulhall, Mertens & Flowers, 2001; Sobel & Kudler, 2007; Caspe, Lopez & Wolos, 2006/2007).

- The lack of training for pre-service teachers and the lack of professional development in collaboration skills for in-service teachers as well as principals (Tichenor, 1997; Epstein & Sanders, 1998, 2006; Chavkin, 2005; Flynn, 2006; Deslandes, Fournier & Morin, 2008).

- The lack of training and education for parents on how they can be actively involved in their children's education appropriately (Allen, 1997; Epstein & Sander, 1998; Haviland, 2003; Epstein & Jansorn, 2004; Epstein, 2007; Weiss, Little, Bouffard, Deschenes & Malone, 2009).

- Communication between teachers and parents has traditionally been based on negativity, i.e. only reporting problems with students (Ramirez, 2001; Lawson, 2003; Hernandez & Leung, 2004; Epstein, 2007; Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler & Green, 2007).

- The lack of trust between parents and teachers (Adam & Christenson, 2000; Swick, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins & Closson, 2005; Barth, 2006; Cosner, 2009).

- The shortage of appropriate and supportive transition program from elementary to middle school for students as well as parents (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Epstein, 2001; Marchant, Paulson & Rothlisberg, 2001; Ako & Galassi, 2004; Bertrand & Deslandes, 2005).

- Other barriers to the working relationship between parents and teachers include the lack of time to collaborate and the high teacher-to-student ratio in middle school (Chrispeels, 1991; Jaksec, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Halsey, 2004).

Part II

The second part of the literature review was devoted to the history of parental involvement. Historically, the relationship between teachers and parents in the United States has had some minor changes until the last few decades. For that reason, it was important to briefly review the changes that have occurred in the recent decades. In the early 1800's, the home and school co-existed in communities and shared responsibilities in the education of children. The concept of parent education had its first seed in the ground. Later in that century, teachers began to gain a more professional role and teachers were viewed as the "senior partner" while parents also began to form their own voices via the birth of parent teacher organizations better known today as the PTO (Hutchins, 2008). From the 1900's to 1960's, schools slowly became more formalized with government involvement in the form of establishing education acts. This movement began to add complexity to the parent/teacher relationship and with a large number of women that moved into the work force during and after World War II, the roles of home and school changed once again (Stark, 1999). The pendulum temporarily swung back to where teachers are professional and parents' job is to support teachers' authority. In the 1960's, the pursuit of higher academics and the United States as a super power in the world definitely made education a priority for the nation. However, due to the social

reforms in the 1970's, the increased involvement from the federal government and the amplified media influences, parental involvement slowly became a front burner issue in education. Parental involvement is now actively needed and expected. As a result, the body of research in the area of parental involvement has been most concentrated in the past 30-60 years. Within those three to six decades of history, there has been many changes with new academic knowledge, teaching pedagogy, societal make-up, media involvement, family structure, technology and needs of children; yet, little has changed in teacher training. Therefore, the need to change the way our country trains teachers to work effectively with students and their parents exist.

Part III

The third part of the literature review was solely focused on the training aspect of parental involvement for pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, principals and parents. Under that umbrella of training teachers, there were sub-areas that contributed to the factor. They consisted of the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement, the elements of working with parents, building trust, building communication, building efficacy, the middle school years, best practice in middle school, pre-service teacher training, in-service teacher training, administrator training and parent training. The deficient areas in the body of research studies under the general umbrella of teacher training lied in two huge sub-areas: middle school and the specific one-on-one working relationship between parents and teachers.

In the past decades, a leading researcher in the area of parental involvement at Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Joyce Epstein, believed that parental involvement is more

than merely a mandate (Epstein, 2005). NCLB (No Child Left Behind) identified

parental involvement as an essential component to school improvement. The federal

policy required schools that receive Title I funding to provide teachers with professional

development specifically targeted in the area of parental involvement. Despite focus and

funding, it did not guarantee direct impact on significantly improving the working

relationship between teachers and parents.

Traditionally, in university teacher preparation programs, there is little or even no

training in working with parents (Sindelar, Daunic & Rennells, 2004; Flanigan, 2005).

For most teachers, learning to work with parents is mostly made up of "live and learn"

experiences and many teachers are self-taught on the job when it came to working with

parents. Various research studies pointed out at as much as 85% of the universities in the

nation do not have an established course or curriculum in training pre-service teachers to

work with parents (Sindelar, Daunic and Rennells, 2004). For example, Shartrand,

Weiss, Kreider and Lopez (1997) surveyed sixty teacher education programs in twenty-

two states. Only 37% claimed to have a full course on family involvement and 83% said

family involvement is only taught as a part of the course. Traditionally, teacher

education program have focused on training teachers in three main areas: subject matter,

pedagogy of teaching methods and child development knowledge.   Our nation simply

does not do an adequate job in training teachers to work with parents (Broussard, 2003).

Even with federal government involvement and a plethora of research studies, the lack of

specific training for teachers to work with parents continues to be an ongoing and mostly

ignored problem.

With all of these identifiable factors, the lack of training for teachers, administrators and parents seemed to be at the root of the entire issue. After all, it is irrational to ask people to participate and contribute to a process that they have little or no education or training to do. Though there are many factors that contribute to the success or failure of this imperative working relationship between parents and teachers, the logical path for a positive change could start with a concentration on training. Training would consist of the learning of communication and other related skills to enhance both the teacher and parent's ability to build and sustain this relationship.

In summary, a three-part literature review was conducted:

- Part I- General review of parental involvement and working relationship between parents and teachers (ten main factors)

- Part II – The historical changes in parental involvement

- Part III – A focus specifically on middle school teacher training in working with parents and related topics (the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement, the elements of working with parents, building trust, building communication, building efficacy, the middle school years, best practice in middle school, pre-service teacher training, in-service teacher training, administrator training and parent training.)

The impact of effective parent/teacher relationships on student achievement

This is a general review of the research on the impact of an effective working relationship with parents. The review of literature showed a positive correlation between

parental involvement and student achievement. The review showed that parental involvement is the most dependable and consistent evidence for student achievement at all levels throughout K-12. Studies have shown that children who have caring and supportive adults that communicate their expectations not only perform well in schools but also had more future success. The review of literature showed the significance of the correlation between parental involvement and student achievement and its effects. This researcher chose to review this section of literature in chronological order to demonstrate the consistency of linking parental involvement to student achievement over time.

In 1988, Henderson summarized the findings of 125 studies on the topic of parental involvement and linked it with student achievement. She inferred that children whose parents stayed in touch with school and helped at home scored higher than other children who had similar background but without parental involvement. Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Burow (1995) reported on parental involvement with students' homework. They interviewed 69 parents from two elementary schools. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, checked for accuracy and coded for analysis. Results suggested that parents' involvement in homework was based on their understanding of their children and their own ability as parents to help with academic work. The study recommended that teachers encourage and provide support to parents to help their children as this promoted achievement and long-term success for students.

In 1996, Griffith studied the relationship between parental involvement, parental expectations and school traits regarding student achievement. Forty-two suburban elementary schools were examined. Over 11,300 survey packets were sent home to parents and over 9,500 (84%) of them were returned. Findings support that parental

involvement correlated positively with student test performance consistently. Parental expectations along with parental involvement accounted for the largest amount of variances in student performance.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) reviewed 51 research studies on parental involvement from 1993-2002 and found that parental involvement was a critical and common component of student achievement. Students of all age levels benefitted from parental involvement including middle and high school students. Sadly, the United States Department of Education (2003) reported that over 90% of parents are involved in elementary school and that number declines to 75% in middle school and below 60% in high schools which only supported the findings of the majority of parental involvement research studies (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Redding, Langdon, Meyer and Sheley of the Academic Development Institute examined comprehensive parental involvement and student achievement in 2004. One hundred and twenty-nine high poverty elementary school students participated. Findings showed that the cumulative effects from interaction between teachers and parents where a consistent message to children and parent education on their role in learning are keys in building the working relationship between parents and teachers and enhancing student performance.

Jeynes (2005) conducted a meta-analysis to determine the overall effects of parental involvement on K-12 students academic achievement. The meta-analysis included 77 research studies encompassing 300,000 students. Jeynes confirmed that parental involvement correlated positively with higher student achievement across various populations and across various measurement outcomes such as grades,

standardized test scores and teacher ratings.   When compared with the academic achievement score distribution or range of scores for children whose parents were highly involved in their education, scores were substantially higher than those of their counterparts whose parents were less involved. Within the components of parental involvement, parental expectations were the highest influence while parent and children communication ranked as a close second. Parental programs also have some effect but the impact was less than parental expectations. School personnel such as teachers, counselors and administrators should be trained to support parental involvement because they can be most helpful in facilitating constructive conversations between school and home, sharing effective strategies for student achievement and providing resources to support student learning.

Summary. Although each of these research studies focused on a different aspect of parental involvement, over time, the end results seemed to be pointing in two specific directions. First, parental involvement, particularly at home, is a bedrock foundation for student achievement. This fact spanned across socio-economic status, ethnicity and culture. More than one research study pointed out the fact that parental expectations as well as communication with their children at home ranked as the biggest influence in the home portion of parental involvement. Second, communication from school is the key in engaging parents. After all, parents needed information from teachers in order to have communication at home with their children regarding their learning. Typical teenagers are known to not communicate school information well to their parents. Communication between teachers and parents also served to build trust that solidified their working relationship. In various studies, teachers and schools were also named as a significant

source of student achievement expectations but perhaps not to the extent of parents. In other words, students will respond to teacher expectations in learning and achievement but not to the degree of parental expectations. Nonetheless, teachers are an important part of the equation to successful student achievement. Given the strong link between supportive adult relationships (both parents and teachers) and student achievement, it is only logical to make this link a priority for every school and every teacher. Simply put, student achievement can only be maximized by a solid working relationship between parents and teachers. This relationship starts with trust and communication; which are also directly related to teacher and parent self-efficacy.

The elements of effective working relationships with parents

Figure 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid
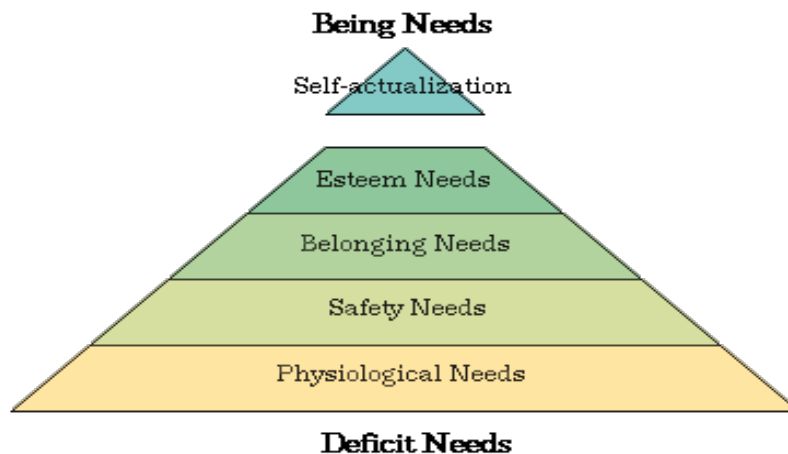
(Maslow, 1943)

This was a general review of the research on what appeared to be the elements of established effective working relationships with parents.   Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid (Figure 1) clearly illustrated the importance of the five basic needs in human beings. Maslow used the terms physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization needs to describe the pattern that human motivations generally move through (Maslow, 1943).   If parents and students struggled with basic physical and safety needs in life, they would not have the ability to focus on self-actualization.

On the other hand, the base of every working relationship between teachers and parents is trust and when there is trust, the communication begins to build. Once communication and trust were established, both teachers and parents' sense of efficacy for involvement increased. Trust is established with a sense of belonging to someone or some group. Efficacy is highly related to how one views his/her own ability to contribute. Trust, communication and efficacy are inter-related and also related to the building of effective working relationships between teachers and parents in order to establish a sense of belongingness with each other.

Building trust

Trust is defined as reliance on character, ability, strength, dependence and truth about someone or something (Merriam Webster, 2011). The definition paralleled the qualities that research says parents needed and wanted in a working relationship with teachers.   The consistent message from parents is the fact that they need regular communication. On the other hand, the research about teacher preparation programs found that some teachers do not even believe they are obligated or responsible to work

with parents or to learn to work with them. This may very well be the beginning of the disconnect between teachers and parents.

Within every human relationship, trust is an essential component. The working relationship between teachers and parents is no exception to that rule. In the review of literature on parental involvement, the theme of trust was sprinkled throughout the research and referenced as an important part of building solid working relationships between teachers and parents. Trust building must be a part of the reforms in the American education system and schools. As a matter of fact, educators could support reforms by building trusting relationships over time (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Scholars have long studied trust as a psychological construct; however, the specific study of trust issues between parents and teachers in middle school setting is still in its infancy.

Trust must exist in all human relationships. Effective communication is the building block of that trust. If any two parties intend to work together effectively, a method or system of communication must be developed in order to have successful sharing of information, ideas and needs. Anything less than a purposeful approach to this level of communication will, no doubt, reduce the chance of establishing and sustaining such relationships (Schumacher, 2008). Research studies showed that communication between parents and teachers and between parents and children are the two of the most imperative components of parental involvement (Jeynes, 2005). Between a school and home setting, adult-to-adult communication must be made a priority. Within the home, adult and child communication must also be made a priority. This priority to communicate builds a sense of attachment, belonging, support and reliance. This is particularly true in middle school as children and parents changed from one main teacher

to teams of teachers. It is also particularly challenging because middle school is when children begin to pull away from parents and teachers yet they needed them more than ever.

What does the literature say about parental involvement and trust? In 2000, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy studied the nature, meaning and measurement of trust. First, they examined the importance of trust in schools. Second, they looked at the dynamic of trust and finally, they synthesized the research on trust in relation to organizational processes. They reviewed four decades of literature on trust. In this study, they defined trust as "reliance on others' competence and their willingness to look after rather than harm what is entrusted to their care." (p. 4).

They found the following fundamental elements of *trust:*

- Trust is necessary for effective cooperation and communication.

- Trust is foundational for cohesive and productive relationships.

- Trust is the willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on confidence.

- Facets of trust include vulnerability, confidence, benevolence, reliability, competence and honesty.

- Among teachers and principals, all of the facets seemed significant.

- As the measure of trust builds up, it transfers to specific people.

- A person with high degree of trust is likely to see the good and is able to overlook the flaws in an individual.

- Trust promotes a worthy reputation.

They also found the following fundamental elements of *distrust:*

- As trust declines, the cost of doing business goes up.

- Distrust provokes feelings of anxiety, insecurity and discomfort.

- Distrust provokes feelings of being unsafe and leads to minimizing
vulnerability.

- Distrust promotes the withholding of important information.

- Distrust creates a tendency to perpetuate more mistrust.

Schools play an important role in society; students must trust their teachers in order to learn. Since student achievement has been directly linked to parental involvement repeatedly, it was reasonable to presume that trust must be a part of those relationships as well. In this study, the authors stated that the climate of a school either cultivated or inhibited the building of trust. If schools are to be effective, they must create a culture that inspires teachers to go beyond the requirements of their job and work to earn the trust of the participants. The greater the trust between teachers, parents and students; the greater the student achievement scores (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

Even though trust was found to be an important connector between teachers and parent in their working relationship, it did not always exist. As a matter of fact, there was often distrust and the working relationship between teachers and parents failed because of that very fact. In a qualitative study of parent empowerment and teacher professionalism, two Israeli researchers, Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008), conducted in-depth interviews with 12 graduate students who are also elementary teachers. They found teachers were in favor of parental involvement but were also

vulnerable to the increased influence and the scrutiny of their work by parents. The

fears of these teachers indicated a lack of trust in parents. The findings of this overseas

study paralleled the findings from studies in the United States (Markow & Martin,

2005). This seemed to be a universal concern of teachers.

In a recent qualitative study, Angell, Stoner and Sheldon (2009) recruited 16

mothers of children with several disabilities to conduct semi-structured interviews.

They stated that trust is the first step in creating a collaborative relationship that links to

student achievement. Trust may be needed for full collaboration between parents and

teachers. Trust will bring about not only positive perception from parents but also more

involvement. As a matter of fact, Bryk and Schneider (2003) suggested, "relational trust

is the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and

welfare of students." (p. 44). Factors that contributed to trust or distrust were openness,

authenticity, reliability, responsiveness, effective communication and competency.

Parents reported that the prime characteristics that made teachers trustworthy were

authentic caring and communication. On the other hand, the characteristics that

promoted distrust with teachers were the lack of knowledge about children's disabilities

and inflexibility. The findings were triangulated, validated and member checked. In

addition, this study found that school climate; school services and teaming were also

factors in the building or inhibition of trust towards the school. As a matter of fact, the

three consistent characteristics of good schools were found to be student achievement,

collective efficacy of faculty and faculty's trust of parents and students. (Hoy, Tarter &

Hoy, 2006).

The issue of trust was not just embedded between specific teachers and parents; rather, it could also be found within the school or between school and home as a whole. Many of the research studies on trust were solely focused on trust within the organization. However, Forsyth, Barnes and Adams (2006) conducted a research study to investigate relational trust, specifically parent trust, for desirable outcome for schools. They worked with 79 mid-western schools with individual responses from a random sampling of parents and teachers. There are four important findings. First, trust begins and is important between the primary role groups of the school community. These primary role groups are teachers, counselors and administrators. Second, socio-economic status (SES) of the school and parental expectations could counter-balance, to some degree for low teacher trust. Third, schools could not completely eliminate the effects of poverty. In other words, even if teachers and parents have a great sense of trust with each other, it would not erase all of the negative effects of poverty. Fourth, school effectiveness was connected to conscious effort at building trust between teachers and parents.

In a follow up study, Adams, Forsyth and Mitchell (2009) studied how organizational conditions predict variability in parent-school trust. Seventy-nine schools (22 elementary schools, 30 middle schools and 27 high schools) of diverse student population participated. Parent and student instruments were administered. The overall finding was social exchanges with mutually shared beliefs about expectations and responsibilities built group relational trust. This trust grew over time with repeated social exchanges. In addition, parents' sense of influence on school decisions and students' feeling of belonging accounted for the biggest variation of trust between

parents and school. These findings led to the following recommendations. First, school administrators should expand their interaction, with appropriate boundaries between school and home, to build trust. Second, parents' trust was mostly dependent on social norms, emotional and affective needs of parents. Third, shared educational responsibility with parents built and sustained trust. Finally, the more knowledge regarding another's group roles (i.e. parents are familiar with teachers' role and vice-versa), the more vulnerability between the groups, which was needed for trust to occur between the groups.

Summary. Although trust has not been extensively studied in regards to school and home, the handful of studies did confirm the importance of trust in parental involvement. Fortunately, these studies began to give the body of research some new insights as to which components of trust are most valued by parents, teachers, students and administrators. Further research studies are needed to better understand not only which aspects of trust need additional focus on, but also how to train all groups to work towards building a strong sense of trust between school and home.   One component of trust that was universally important to all relationships is communication. The next set of literature review focused on the communication aspect of the working relationship between parents and teachers and how that built trust between them.

Building communication

Communication has been a theme throughout the broad body of parental involvement research. Communication is at the heart of parent/teacher relationships because it is the foundation to any human relationship. There is no dispute as to the importance of communication, particularly regular communication, between parents and

teachers. The concerns regarding communication arose from two main sources: First, parents' need for regular communication was often unmet. Second, communication between home and school often lingered with a negative tone.

In this section of literature review, I started with the history and then the need for regular communication and finally, focused on the various forms of communication. In 2004, Halsey carried out a case study to learn about teachers', parents' and students' perception of parental involvement. Participants included eight teachers, 20 parents and 19 adolescents in a junior high school. Data was collected via interviews, observations and document collection. Data was analyzed with the comparative method. Results pointed toward a lack of mutual understanding regarding the role of parents at the school. Failing to communicate with parents effectively was cited as one of the factors for the lack of higher mutual understanding. These findings were consistent with Dauber and Epstein's 1993 study. This indicated that little progress has taken place to change the practice of involving parents. A second finding indicated that casual and chance encounters did not promote success. Schools needed to purposefully plan meaningful and regular interaction time between parents and teachers. Finally, parents and teachers may have perceived communication efforts differently and therefore, they could both become disheartened in the pursuit of an effective working relationship.

In 2002, Ho reported in her action research study with families of an elementary school that four themes emerged about parent/teacher working relationships. 1) Parents requested more frequent communication. 2) Parents requested information on ways to help their children. 3) Parents, in general, articulated satisfaction with the school. 4)

Parents requested special considerations in the form of services and programs that would help them become better parents.

In a 2004 qualitative study, Miretzky studied parent/teacher perspectives on their relationship. The study consisted of three-phases: observations, interviews and focus groups. The observations took place in three elementary schools. Seventeen parents and 21 teachers were interviewed for an hour each, and two mixed parents/teachers focus groups took place over ten hours. The purpose of the observations was to get a sense of the "culture" and daily conduct of parents and teachers. Interview questions were formulated from the observations. Seven themes emerged from the interviews and these themes were used to structure the focus group discussions Results were broken down to several main points: 1) Both parents and teachers believed in the importance of their working relationship and would like to have more opportunities to connect. 2) Both groups desired to have clearer, accurate, timely and regular communication. 3) Both groups could see the benefits of a solid working relationship for students but not for themselves. 4) Both groups were not particularly accepting of excuses for non-involvement. 5) Both groups perceived there were ways around the obstacles of their relationship. 6) Expectations for parental involvement were powerful across gender, class, and religious groups among parents. 7) Teachers believed that a working relationship was important with parents but felt constrained by time, priorities and administrative resources. 8) Teachers felt that trust was obstructed by children's version of the truth rather than the facts. 9) Both groups felt defensiveness got in the way of constructive communication between them. 10) Each side has certain doubts, misunderstandings and under-appreciation about each other, which often led to mistrust.

The conclusion was that additional paid time for teachers, inclusion of parents as part of the solution, sufficient and regular communication for both administrators and teachers were the keys to making this working relationship between parents and teachers not only happen but also flourish.

Types of communication

What does regular communication look like? Nowadays, there are so many ways to communicate and researchers studied which ones seemed to be preferable with parents and teachers. In 1998, Upham, Cheney and Manning conducted a study in two New Hampshire communities and two groups participated in this study. One group consisted of three male and three female experienced teachers. The second group consisted of parents with children with emotional behavior disorder (EBD). Findings consisted of: 1) Teachers felt it was best to have face-to-face conversation with parents. 2) Parents seemed to prefer phone calls as a secondary choice. 3) Sending notes was the least preferred format of communication for both groups. 4) Both groups cited lack of time as an issue but for different reasons. 5) Teachers preferred to start with a large group meeting such as open house while parents preferred to start the school year with a more intimate, in-depth meeting privately. 6) Both groups perceived that difficult and emotional communication was a factor in distancing communication between them.

Even though parents preferred face-to-face conversations, both parents and teachers' work schedules did not always allow that luxury. With the availability of internet usage in public schools, new research has emerged regarding the use of internet to enhance communication between teachers and parents. Bouffard (2008) conducted a similar research study on using technology to enhance family/school communication.

Nearly 15,000 tenth-graders participated in this study and over 90% participated in a follow up study two years later. Data was also collected from parents and school administrators. The findings had some similarities as Schumacher's 2008 study. 1) More advantaged families (likely white-collar) utilized electronic communication. 2) Internet communication enhanced student achievement. 3) About 1/3 of the families frequently used internet communication while 2/3 used it infrequently. 4) Students of all backgrounds benefitted from internet communication. 5) Internet communication was used when children were NOT having academic issues. The overall conclusion was that internet communication is helpful but still largely under utilized yet it is linked to student achievement. The usage of e-mail as a format was one consideration but how did the content enhance or derail communication between parents and teachers?

In 2008, Thompson performed a study on parent/teacher e-mail communication. Purposeful sampling was used to collect information-rich e-mails. Characteristics of parent/teacher e-mail were analyzed. In addition, 30 parents and 30 teachers were interviewed. Coding was used to examine the data from both the interviews and emails. Findings included: 1) Grades were discussed at length in their communication. 2) At all grade levels, teachers communicated frequently with a handful of parents via e-mail. 3) Generally, teachers initiated e-mail communication but sometimes parents would do so for their own reasons. 4) Students, in general, liked parents and teachers' communication via e-mail. 5) Both parents and teachers report that e-mails help some students improve their grades. However, the findings in this study did not indicate that the use of e-mail drastically increased parent/teacher communication. White-collar parents were more likely to use this electronic format of communication than blue-collar parents because of

internet access. Finding suggested that parents/teachers should rely on other forms of communication rather than e-mails only. This affirmed the earlier findings that parents and teachers did preferred face-to-face conversations.

Summary. Regardless of the form of communication and its effectiveness, one thing was clear: regular communication between school and home, specifically between teachers and parents, is the basis for the building and sustaining of solid working relationship. The time to question the necessity of communication is over. What is needed is the training for both groups in order for the process to work more effectively.

Building efficacy

There is a positive correlation between parent self-efficacy and their level of involvement with their children's teachers (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Efficacy is defined for teachers as teacher's beliefs that they are able to teach, their students can learn from them and they have a body of professional knowledge when they need it. This sense of efficacy has direct impact on a teacher's confidence in his/her role as a teacher. Such confidence is needed not only in teaching pedagogy, classroom management, and relationships with students but also in working and communicating with parents. By the same token, efficacy is defined for parents as parents' belief that they have the skills and knowledge to help and support learning, their help enhances students' learning, their help is wanted and needed and their support has impact and is effective for their children's success. Research studies supported this definition (Bandura, 1997). Parents were also more likely to become involved with schools/teachers if they viewed their participation as a "requirement" of parenting because most parents do desire and try to be responsible parents. In other words, parents tended to be more involved if they perceived that there

was an expectation for them to be involved both from teacher and student (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones & Reed, 2002). Parents were also more likely to be involved if they believed that they had the skills and knowledge to help their children (Bandura, 1997). In addition, parents became more involved if they connected that their actions to the improved academic learning and success of their children (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1992). Although there is a growing body on research on both parent and teacher efficacy, it was not the main focus of the literature review because the main focus was teacher training.

Hoover-Dempsey of Vanderbilt University is a leading researcher in efficacy. Her on-going research yielded the following series of studies. In 1987, Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Brissie studied teachers' efficacy in a large-scale study and found that teachers with the strongest efficacy related to parents in parent/teacher conferences, volunteering, home tutoring and perceived parental support.   A follow up study by the same research group in 1992 yielded similar conclusions (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) suggested three conditions that were necessary for parental involvement: First, parents have to develop a parental role construct that affirmed parental involvement in education. Second, parents have a positive sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed. Third, the parents perceived opportunities to be involved with their children's education.

Gettinger and Guetschow (1998) examined the perception of roles, efficacy and opportunities for parental involvement with 142 teachers and 558 parents in elementary, middle and high schools. Parents and teachers completed parallel questionnaires. They specifically studied two types of roles in parental involvement: first, parental roles that

had direct contact and impact on their children; and second, parental roles that had indirect contact and had less direct impact on their children. Findings suggested that both teachers and parents agreed that parents were more effective through direct involvement than indirect involvement.   Parents and teachers were consistent in their role expectations for parents but desired a greater participatory role from parents. This suggested that both sides had a greater willingness to maximize parental involvement for the benefit of the students' education. This study also discovered that the lack of time along with work demands were greater barriers to parental involvement than socio-economic status, culture, language or ethnicity.

Bertrand and Deslandes conducted a research study in 2005 with 770 parents and 45 teachers in five Canadian public high schools. Each participant completed a survey questionnaire that focused on the topics of role construction, self-efficacy and perception of parents. Results indicated that parental involvement should be studied as two separate topics: one is their involvement at home and the second is their involvement at school. Furthermore, to improve the involvement of parents, schools must sensitize parents to their duties, responsibilities, roles and those of the school and teachers, so that parents would be more encouraged to connect with the school.

Finally, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) studied the dimensions of teacher efficacy, strain and burnout. This study was conducted in Norway where 244 elementary and middle school teachers participated. A 24 item survey was developed to measure six dimensions and they are instruction, adaptation to individual student needs, motivating students, keeping discipline, cooperating with colleagues and parents, and coping with changes and challenges. They found that efficacy beliefs established how environmental

opportunities and impediments were perceived. They also found that teacher efficacy, strain and burnout were related to four main factors: teaching students with behavior problems, conflict with parents, conflict between teachers, and having the organization of teaching dictated to teachers in a way that does not work for them. Among these four factors, parents and organization were the strongest issues. The weakness of this study was the inability to generalize the findings to the American parents and teachers.

Summary. Parents and teachers must acknowledge their differences yet find common ground so they can focus on their commitment and caring towards the children that they share. Self-efficacy of both parents and teachers directly impacted their willingness and ability to build trust with communication. Further studies devoted specifically to finding the balance between these three components (trust, communication and efficacy) of the working relationship between parents and teachers are needed.

Among every section of the literature review from student achievement to pre-service teacher training, a common neglected theme was middle school. Due to the uniqueness of middle school and the distinctive needs of both parents and students, a section of the literature review was devoted to middle school and how parental involvement played out differently in that world.

The middle school years (a distinct area of focus)

A specific review of research studies that only focused on middle school was needed since these years are distinctly different from elementary and high school. Parental involvement is important in elementary school and it is essential to continue in middle school. According to Sanders (2001), the relationship between teachers and parents can create safe school environments, strengthen parenting skills, encourage

community service, improve academic skills and achieve other school goals such as increased attendance. In research studies previously described, parental involvement has shown to have a positive impact on student achievement. Traditional parental involvement has consisted of activities or volunteer activities but current research expanded the definition to include parental expectations and home behavior. These are types of parental involvement that had direct and positive impact on student learning and achievement rather than school-based activities.

In the past, research (Hallinan, 1994; Hauser, 1994; Hanson, McLanahan & Thomson, 1997; Ma, 2000; Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2001) has long suggested that socio-economic status was the strongest factor in predicting academic achievement and to some degree; it is still a strong predictor. More recent research, however, showed that parental involvement is the most important factor. An important goal for middle schools should not only be general parental involvement but also the specific and effective components for meaningful involvement in middle school that will lead to improved student success. While many parents would like to and do stay involved in middle school, only a small number of them received guidance from school on how to be helpful to their children and to remain involved. Therefore, middle schools have a responsibility to make effective parental involvement take place that is appropriate for the needs of adolescents a priority.

The change from childhood to adolescent. Students of middle school age are entering the world of puberty where their physical, emotional, cognitive and social developments often brought about challenges for both parents and teachers. Adolescents need trusting and caring relationships from significant adults even if they put up some

resistance. Middle school students felt more comfortable and secure when they connected with adults who cared. The home-school relationship is important in a middle student's life. Despite those drastic adolescent changes and heavier academic demands, research studies showed a decline of parental involvement begins and continues throughout the middle school years (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Wright & Willis, 2003). Many reasons contributed to that decline and they were: 1) Parents' perception that they lacked ability to help with more advanced subject matters (Adams & Christenson, 2000). 2) Parents' perception that teenagers needed more autonomy (Eccles & Harold, 1993). 3) Fewer contacts with upper grade teachers (Epstein & Voorhis, 2001). 4) Secondary teachers' attitude, perceptions and behaviors (Broderick & Mastrilli, 1997).

The change from a primary teacher to multiple teachers. To complicate matters, teachers needed even more parental support, beyond elementary school years, to navigate the challenges that adolescent changes bring to the academic world yet teachers felt inadequately prepared to engage parents effectively (Wright, Heimelreich & Daniel, 2002). Unfortunately, the combinations of these issues created barriers rather than opened channels for a solid working relationship between teachers and parents. This regrettable reality also contributed to the decline of student achievement. Furthermore, the research in parental involvement during middle school had two main issues. First, the body of research in middle school parental involvement had not been studied systematically. Second, since most of the research on parental involvement had been focused on elementary schools, little is known about parental involvement in middle schools in comparison.

What the research suggests about best practices specific to middle school. The literature review of parental involvement in middle school yielded a longitudinal study conducted by Singh, Bickley and Trivette (1995) from 1988 – 1995 on the four components of parental involvement with eighth-grade students. Nearly 22,000 eighth-graders from over 1,000 middle schools took part in this study. Results indicated the following main points: 1) Parental participation in school activities had no effect on student achievement. 2) Parental involvement defined as educational aspiration presented the most influence on student achievement. 3) Schools identified ways to help parents convey high aspirations for their middle school children. The conclusion of the study was by aligning support and communication between home and school along with policies and programs that helped develop parental objectives for their children, the communication between home and school would lead to higher student achievements. The study provided a glimpse into the history of middle school parental involvement research and the importance of regular communication between teachers and parents. After all, the disconnect from elementary to middle school arose from the odd occurrence of more teachers but less communication. Further research only confirmed the importance of regular communication.

Ho and Willms conducted a middle school parental involvement study in 1996. This study identified four dimensions of parental involvement and the relationships of each dimension with parental background and academic achievement. They claimed that parental involvement varied because of the difference in parents' social background and values. Over 1,000 eighth-graders were measured on 12 items. Results indicated when schools promoted better communication with parents; it encouraged parents to be more

involved both at school and at home. Unfortunately, the practice of high quality and quantity of communication between school and home was uncommon among middle schools. On the other hand, home involvement, particularly with discussions about school-related topics, had the strongest connection to academic achievement. The secondary issues such as socio-economic status and family background only accounted for 7- 10% of the variation in parental involvement. The evidence suggested that even though the traditional factors such as SES and background accounted for some parental involvement difference, the main differences stemmed from the conversations and expectations at home in regard to school-related topics.

A research study of parents' familiarity about middle school practices took place between 1999-2000 (Mulhall, Mertens & Flowers). One hundred thirty-one schools and over 20,000 parents from three states were involved in the study. Parents were asked about their familiarity with six middle school practices. These practices stemmed from a large-scale study by the Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois. The six practices included: 1) Interdisciplinary teaming. 2) Advisory program. 3) Integrated lessons. 4) Heterogeneous grouping. 5) Exploratory activities. 6) Cooperative learning. Results showed that parents were not very familiar with any of these practices but within these six, parents were most familiar with cooperative learning. The conclusion suggested that a high level of parental information about middle school practices was essential for parents to understand the characteristics of high performing middle schools and therefore could better serve parents for the purpose of student success. As a matter of fact, parents self reported that when they felt

more familiar with middle school practices, they were more likely to have both a positive attitude and engagement at their children's school.

Belenardo (2001) conducted a study that looked at practices and conditions that led to a sense of community in middle schools. Parents and teachers filled out parallel surveys about the sense of community, school programs, practices and leadership styles. The study suggested that parents' sense of community with the school was fortified by the school activities that generated regular communication. In other words, parents felt more connected with the school if parental involvement activities and events promoted regular communication that kept them well informed. Also in 2001, Marchant, Paulson and Rothlisberg examined the relationship between middle school students' perception of family and school contexts with academic achievement. A group of 230 fifth and sixth graders were asked about their perception of their parents' parenting style, parental involvement, teacher's teaching style and school atmosphere. Results confirmed the significance of both parents and teachers' supportive role in young adolescents' school achievement. The specific characteristics of the home may account for the largest effect. Finally, not only was the actual involvement significant, the perception of the student also mattered.

In a qualitative study, Halsey (2004) used unstructured and semi-structured interviews with eight teachers, 20 parents and 19 students. She also gathered data from observations and school documents and concluded that middle school parents found consistent communication with both their children and the teachers the most helpful practice for involvement. In a meta-analysis, Hill and Tyson (2009) examined 50 studies of strategies that promoted middle school achievement and concluded that parental

involvement had a positive correlation to student achievement with the exception of parental help on homework. The goal of this study was to isolate which type of parental involvement in middle school was most effective in student achievement. The research team set three criteria for the selection of studies to be examined. These criteria included studies that measured parental involvement and student achievement, studies that focused on middle school population and Pearson's r and d-indexes. On the other hand, they excluded research studies that were broad based parental involvement. The two main research questions were: 1) what is the strength of the relationship between parental involvement in education and achievement during middle school? 2) Which types of involvement have the strongest positive relation with achievement?

In the past, Epstein's (1984) research demonstrated that parental involvement was important but at the time, it was unclear as to which type of parental involvement was most effective. The results of this 2009 study by Hill and Tyson showed that among the various types of parental involvement, academic socialization had the strongest positive correlation with student achievement. Academic socialization is defined as parental involvement that included understanding, purposes, goals, communication, strategies and meaning in academic performance. Parents and teachers relationships are critical for middle school students' achievement. However, due to the number of students per middle school teacher as well as the number of teachers per student, the development of an effective working relationship between middle school teachers and parents proved to be a challenge. In contrast, homework help had the strongest negative correlation with student achievement because homework help was defined as over-assistance with homework leaving little independence for the middle school child. A secondary

conclusion was that other types of home-based and school-based involvement such as enrichment activities at home also had positive correlation to achievement but not as strong as academic socialization.

Summary. Being a middle school teacher in today's world is multifaceted. The demands are particularly challenging and at times, the accountability pressures can be relentless. For many teachers, particularly the beginning teachers, the pre-service training they may or may not have received at the university was simply not sufficient to meet the challenges. Additional professional development is not only necessary but should also be addressed in a timely fashion yet in reality, professional development on building relationships with parents is virtually non-existence.

Training

Pre-service teacher training in effective working relationships with parents. This was a general review of pre-service training in regards to effective working relationships with parents. Although there was a good amount of research on pre-service teacher training, there were few studies that specifically focused on training teachers to work with parents beyond parent/teacher conference. In the United States, there is mounting concern and consensus to devote serious attention to teacher education reform (Allen, 2009). It was generally believed that the current training is simply inadequate in preparing new teachers for the demands of today's classrooms. Regardless of the magnitude and intricacy of building a solid working relationship with parents, teacher education program continued to lack course work in this area (Broussard, 2000). The concern for lack of teacher training was expressed from multiple places such as policies from the federal government, pressure from society, student teachers themselves as well

as the media to produce more effective teachers. The fact that most teacher education programs have not kept up with the ever-growing changes and needs in education continues to cause lasting concerns. For instance, as the United States has become more diverse in population, many pre-service as well as in-service teachers have not been trained to educate and interact with a culturally diverse population. In various research studies over the past twenty years, pre-service and in-service teachers have both been shown to have inadequate training in working with parents effectively. A historical approach for this portion of literature review showed the change or lack of change in teacher preparation program over the last two decades.

Beginning in 1988, Chavkins and Williams conducted a research study of the southwest region universities. They surveyed 133 colleges and universities in six states and found that only 4-15% of the universities had a single course that was designated to training pre-service teachers on how to work with parents. Only 37% of the professors taught at least one class period on the topic and those took place mostly in special education or early childhood classes.

Following that, Hinz, Clarke & Nathan (1992) investigated all of the universities and colleges in Minnesota and found that only one out of 27 who offered a K-12 education degree had one course in parental involvement. Upon examining other course listings, only six out of 1,300 courses had any coverage in this area. Around the same time, Bailey, McWilliam and Winton (1992) stated that the strongest interventions are the teacher education programs that included family on the intervention of children's education. The need was definitely there but the training was not. Radcliffe, Malone and Nathan (1994) studied the requirements for all 50 states and found that no state actually

required a course in parental involvement for certification. Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider and Lopez (1997) studied education program in 22 states and discovered that only nine out of 60 education program even had one course in parental involvement. It was clear that factually, pre-service teachers did not receive much course work, if any, in parental involvement. However, did the universities view the problem in the same manner?

Tichenor (1997) conducted a study that examined the attitudes and preparation of pre-service teachers toward working with parents in elementary schools. A total of 257 education majors from one mid-western and two southeastern universities participated in the study. Out of the 257 students, 140 of them were beginning students and 117 of them were student teaching. They completed a survey developed by Dr. Joyce Epstein with 82 Likert items, six open-ended questions and ten demographic questions. Findings included an overall positive attitude towards all areas of parental involvement. Student teachers felt much more prepared to execute parental involvement than beginning teachers. However, about 80% of both groups felt a strong need for education programs to require parental involvement course work. Students in this study expressed a need to understand the benefits of involving parents, strategies for reaching and involving parents, effective communication and conference skills.

Furthermore, Knight and Wadsworth (1999) examined the practices of 101 universities and colleges all over the United States in the area of including family issues in their special education and early childhood certification program curriculum. Questionnaires were mailed to the special education department chairpersons at 146 universities/colleges in all fifty states. One hundred one out of 146 (68%) of the questionnaires were returned. The study found that offering one or more courses on

family issues appeared to be positive. However, the nature of these courses was so generic that the actual focus on family issues was minimal. This study implied that merely offering a course in working with parents was not enough, the actual content of the course mattered in its effectiveness. Even though there is much debate as to how parental involvement should be taught in a pre-service teacher preparation program, infusion or a separated course, what mattered, according to Katz and Bauch (1999), was students who have had pre-service training not only felt much more comfortable with family involvement, they also reached more families. Finally, the topic of working with parents must be addressed in multiple courses systematically in a teacher education program for higher effectiveness.

In 2005, Flanigan conducted a research study to examine if pre-service teachers were adequately prepared. Flanigan surveyed 20 colleges of education faculty and deans in five IPLP (Illinois Professional Learner's Partnership) universities via e-mail and asked two research questions: 1. What courses did you teach in 2000-2001? 2. How did you prepare your pre-service teachers in your classes to work with parents and the community? The study also collected course descriptions online and the course syllabi. A focus group from each of the IPLP universities was formed to discuss their attitude about parental involvement to exchange ideas with classroom activities and field experiences to make recommendations for improvement in teacher preparation programs and to identify main concerns in the area of parental involvement education. Finally, a focus group was also created among the newly graduated teachers of these institutions with the same discussion as the faculty group. The study found similar results as Epstein's 1996 study. Majority of the parental involvement courses in universities were

offered under special education and early childhood education but not for general education students. The review of websites also found similar results where three out of five IPLP universities required parental involvement course under special education and early childhood education. Thirty-three percent of these universities had 15 courses that contained parental involvement as one of the topics.   The survey also found that pre-service teachers benefitted from field experiences that included interactions with parents. In 2005, a more comprehensive follow-up survey was sent to 134 college of education faculty members in these five IPLP universities. Eighty-nine percent of the faculty surveyed believed courses in parental involvement were important. Eighty-four percent actually taught a course in parental involvement while the other 16% at least included this topic in their own course. In other words, none of the faculty surveyed ignored this important topic. Fifty-nine percent of the faculty devoted several sessions of their courses towards partnering with parents. In 2002, focus groups were formed with IPLP faculty and they found several common faculty concerns: 1. Judgmental attitudes toward other cultures among pre-service teachers. 2. Negative attitudes of pre-service teachers toward parents. 3. Mixed messages about parental involvement. 4. Restrictions of teacher education.

In 2005, Graue examined beginning teachers in a large, public university in the mid-west on their thoughts on working with parents. This study aimed to answer the following four questions: 1. How can we understand prospective teachers' disposition towards home-school relations? 2. How do they use personal experience as a resource for relationship building? 3. How do they conceptualize the expertise and responsibilities of parents and teachers? 4. How are these elements foundational to their future

relationships? Nine elementary and secondary pre-service teachers were surveyed. A sample of elementary teachers was selected for in-depth interviews to provide additional information to the survey. Although the interviews helped connect the pre-service teachers' personal values to identifying new ways to work with parents, Graue found that adding just one course or giving attention to a few sessions to an existing course did little to develop new thinking in the area of working with parents in the long run. She suggested a systematic way to help teacher educators include this topic in their programs. Some of the steps Graue suggested are first to recognize that home/school relationship is a complex, cultural relationship, and pre-service teachers should begin to build a professional identity. In addition, pre-service teachers would benefit from merging experiences with other identities.

Arizaga, Bauman, Waldo and Castellanos (2005) looked at the aspect of communication in parental involvement training for pre-service teachers. They theorized that training in communication skills in multicultural environments helped teacher overcome prejudice and teachers became effective in working with diverse student and parent populations. The study was conducted in the mid-size southwest university with 73 pre-service teachers. All participants first took a Quick Discrimination Index Questionnaire (QDIQ) and then they were randomly put into two groups. Both groups were pre-tested but the experimental group received four weekly two–hour session of training in multicultural communication skills while the control group received no training. Findings supported that effective communication skills are important for teachers to succeed in a multicultural teaching environment.

In 2006, Epstein and Sanders conducted a large-scale study of 500 public and private colleges and universities in 37 states. The dean of education at each school was surveyed and initially, 126 of them returned the survey. A follow-up survey was mailed randomly to one-fourth of the non-responding deans. Finally, phone calls were made to 25 deans from the non-response pool of candidates and 11 completed the phone surveys. Data was collected on the quantity and quality of both required and elective course of parental involvement. The deans were asked about their beliefs in the importance of knowledge and skills in the area of parental involvement for their pre-service teacher program. These items were coded on a 3-point scale from 0 to 2. A second set of questions looked into professional specialties and these items were coded in a 4-point scale from 0 to 3. The survey also measured awareness of state law. In addition, the survey asked whether principals desired to hire teachers who were prepared to work with parents. These items were coded in a 4-point scale from 0 to 3. Finally, the survey ended with three open-ended question that probed into the deans' insight for further changes in the current programs. The results indicated that nearly 60% of the studied institutions offered one full course on parental involvement and over 90% of the school offered at least one education course that included the topic of parental involvement. In other words, the topic of parental involvement was covered as one topic in just one class within a program. Forty percent of the 37 states had requirements for pre-service teachers to have course work in parental involvement in order to obtain certification. None of these statistics in course work that were related to working with parents compared the amount of methods and content classes that were required for most teacher preparation program. Four main findings provided some insight towards the progress made in the last ten years

as well as what has to happen in order to continue to make progress. These four findings consisted of: 1. Add a full course to the program of study. 2. Integrate topics in other courses. 3. Target topics to courses on student diversity and special needs. 4. Add field-based experiences that included interactions with parents in addition to course work. Statistically, the lack of training or course work in many university programs was highly discouraging but in order to make a change, we needed to examine what was effective to add into training programs instead of just adding courses that lacked the materials and topics that would be helpful to pre-service teachers.

In 2009, Patterson, Webb and Krudwig conducted a case-based study with 89 special education teachers using parents of children with disabilities. These teachers participated in an IEP (Individual Education Program) meeting with parents to see if 16 beliefs of these teachers would be influenced and if so, which ones. After the IEP meetings, 21 parents formed a focus group and they were interviewed for the purpose of generating advice for pre-service teachers in collaboration with parents. The parents advised the teachers to first take a welcome and friendly stance and send positive notes followed by challenging stereotypical assumptions about parents and finally, collaborated sincerely with parents. Three main themes emerged from the participants: 1. Parents and families sincerely care about their children and wished to actively participate in decision-making. 2. All families had valuable information to contribute. 3. School-family partnership required planned effort, coordination and collaboration. Recommendations from this study supported the consistent findings in the value of application in the authentic context. Working with parents should be part of the component of pre-service teacher program and finally, these authentic field experiences

were effective in helping pre-service teachers to be more resilient in their future work with parents.

In a recent speech, the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan called for a revolutionary change and not merely a tinkering of teacher education programs. However, he continued to push for subject matter competency, classroom management and tracking teachers' success post graduation (Sawchuk, 2009). Although these were all vital components of teaching, the reality of a teacher's job is loaded with other responsibilities such as working with parents. In this area, the typical education program had not provided for that need and the focus from the nation's education department did not seem to include the area of working with parents either.

Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) identified five key knowledge areas that should be included in teacher training program (Caspe, Lopez, Chu & Weiss, 2011): Standards for family engagement; curriculum that advanced the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that teachers needed to engage families; collaborations among various stakeholders; continued professional development around family engagement and evaluation for learning and continuous improvement

Summary. Beyond the issues stated above, virtually none of the research studies specifically targeted middle school teacher preparation programs. Therefore, even though the findings of these studies were relevant in their contribution to increase the effectiveness of pre-service teacher training overall, the knowledge in how to better meet the learning needs of future middle school teachers was still lacking. Many of the long term changes and effectiveness in these programs continued to depend on further research studies in the area of parental involvement in middle schools. This study has specifically

focused of finding the best practices of middle school teachers who are effective in their work with parents.

Finally, with all of the research studies available on the topic of parental involvement, it was apparent some improvements in the area of training teachers to work with parents is needed, however, it was also clear from the research that in order to make an impact on educational reform, the logical first step was to study the steps on the path of learning of effective teachers.

In-service training in effective working relationships with parents. While the lack of training in working with parents was well documented with pre-service teachers, the lack of professional development and continuing education for in-service teacher in working with parents was equally bleak. The challenges of building a solid working relationship between teachers and parents stemmed from limited or even no training. (Coleman & Wallinga, 2000; Bemak & Comely, 2002; Anderson & Minke, 2005).

According to Moir (2009), one third of new teachers deserted the profession within first three years of teaching and nearly 50% left within the first five years, which typically meant these teachers did not even reach tenure before they quitted. This alarming trend was reported in the 2005 MetLife report and this study confirmed the trend. Did the attrition stemmed from the lack training in pre-service preparation programs to work with parents or was it the impact from the lack of training that led to too much stress on the job from parents? There was no definitive answer but either way, attrition is a concern if we continue to lose teachers because of their inability to work effectively with parents in early years of their professional careers. Moore-Johnson and Kardos (2002) conducted in-depth interviews with new teachers to find out why they

chose to leave the profession. The bottom-line was feeling that they were not achieving success with students. Many research studies have linked parental involvement with student success. Part of that missing link related to new teachers' lack of training to build and sustain a working relationship with parents.

In an early review of literature on in-service teachers, MacDonald (1991) found that many teachers never developed the skills to work with parents. One thousand one hundred principals and superintendents in Minnesota were asked if they felt like teachers were well prepared to deal with parents, and 25% said they were as compared to 73% who said they were well prepared for the teaching the content area (Jones, 2001). Lawrence-Lightfoot confirmed this phenomenon in her 2003 book, *Essential conversations*, that nearly all of the teachers that she interviewed had little or even no training in building and sustaining a solid working relationship with parents.

Summary. Although the lack of training began with pre-service teacher preparation programs, there was usually little follow up or support from schools for in-service teachers. Some of this blame could be casted onto principals who did not give or did not know how to give parental involvement training the focus that it needed.

Administrator training in effective working relationship with parents. This was a general review of in-service training for administrators in regard to effective working relationships with parents. Leadership in a school plays a key role in creating, encouraging and sustaining solid working relationships between teachers and parents. Administrators are the ones who set the tone and provide resources to support this crucial relationship. In other words, administrators are the catalyst to the working relationship between teachers and parents (Ganser, 2001; Protheroe, 2006). This working relationship

has been positively linked to student achievement repeatedly in research studies. However, reality is that both teachers and administrators are under trained for this purpose. The problem is two-fold. First, Radcliffe, Malone and Nathan (1994) studied principal preparation programs across the 50 states. They found that only seven states required a course in parental involvement for administrators. Second, Farkas (2003) reported that 67% of principals claimed that current leadership training programs were out of touch with reality in terms of running a school. In addition, there has been no systematic study of principal preparation programs. (Hess & Kelly, 2007). Recent research studies pointed to a need to study the role of a principal. A change was called for from the current practice to a role of higher focus on student achievement, school improvement and standards-based accountability. This change was both timely and necessary. Logically, if teachers' practices needed to change in order to meet today's educational demands, then their supervisors would also require some changes in their own practice as well. Principal training programs lacked parental involvement components and since principals are the catalyst for parental involvement, they were paralyzed in leading teachers in their work with parental involvement unless they received training as teachers or from their own teaching experiences.

Administrators were probably not trained to work with parents when they were teachers. Now as principals, they have also received little to no additional training and their own knowledge came from "on the job" learning. This unpleasant reality only made matters worse for teachers as their school leaders lacked training but were expected to take a leadership role in supporting them to work with parents. Teachers have reported that poor administrative support for parental involvement efforts along with limited and

ineffective training and strategies to be problematic for them (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones & Reed, 2002).

The literature review of principal training looked at perceptions of the need for reform, substance of the programs and effectiveness of coursework. In the 2005 MetLife survey, both principals and teachers were asked about their perspective on the amount of support from administration on parental involvement. Nearly 60% of principals strongly agreed that they provided guidance to teachers in working with parents yet only 39% of teachers shared that perspective so there was a discrepancy. On a separate question, principals were asked about their expectations of teachers. Ninety percent of the principals agreed that effective teachers needed to able to work well with both parents and students. On the other hand, while principals recognized that need for teachers to be trained to work effectively with parents, they generally did not feel that creating this training was their responsibility. Seventy-eight percent of principals felt that this was especially important for first-year teachers but only 29% said they should be chiefly responsible for providing the professional development to meet this need. These results showed a contradiction between principals and teachers.

McNelly (2009) studied the practices and beliefs of administrators and teachers in regards to parental involvement in urban school districts. She surveyed 92 teachers and seven administrators from an east coast urban school district that took part in a statewide parental involvement initiative. Findings suggested that both teachers and administrators must be knowledgeable about parental involvement practices in order to create a partnership with parents. Teacher preparation programs must be reformed not only to

include courses that train teachers to work with parents but the content would go beyond parent/teacher conferences.

Looking at principal preparation programs, several studies shed light on the current issues. Hess and Kelly (2007) examined 56 principal preparation programs that were regarded as prestigious but typical. They focused on seven specific areas in skills and knowledge: 1) Managing for results. 2) Managing personnel. 3) Technical knowledge. 4) External leadership. 5) Norms and values. 6) Managing classroom instruction. 7) School and culture. Two hundred ten syllabi were collected from 31 programs. This study gathered a sample of what future principals were being taught in these programs. Findings concluded that future principals got limited systematic training in those seven areas.

In addition to the substance of the preparation programs, a secondary issue continued to surface regarding the lack of specific preparation for middle school administration. Petzko, Clark, Valentine, Hackmann, Mori and Lucas (2002) carried out a national survey of 1,400 middle school (grades 5-9) administrators. This study was meant to gather and compare data with previous surveys from 1965, 1980 and 1992 regarding recommendations for recruitment, training and professional development of middle school administrators. Results showed that most administrators did not have the academic preparation specific to middle school concepts. In other words, though middle school principals were trained to be administrators, they were not specifically trained to be middle school principals.

Lastly, Flynn and Nolan (2008) explored the topic of principal's perception in teacher-parent relationships. One hundred and forty-four principals of all levels were

asked in a 22-item questionnaire about their perception of first-year teacher preparedness in communicating with parents. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon from the principals' point of view. Three areas of concerns emerged from the study. 1) Principals suggested that many parents are disengaged from their children's schooling. Principals in the survey estimated that only 59% of elementary, 52% of middle and 36% of high school were involved parents. However, it did not pinpoint the specific source or causes of disengagement. 2) Principals stated that many teachers in middle and high schools are ineffective in fostering and maintaining communication with parents. 3) Many new teachers do not possess the necessary skills and knowledge to foster alliances with parents. The principals recommended that teacher preparation programs should require course work in parent-teacher relationships; teachers needed to increase and improve parental involvement and communication. The researchers proposed that teacher preparation programs used their findings to create and/or refine their course work in parental involvement. However, this study did not address the principals' role in providing additional training for teachers in the area of working with parents.

Summary. In this section of the literature review, one common finding was how school programs addressed the working relationship with parents. This was equally as alarming as the lack of training to work with parents in teacher preparation programs. A call for further research in this area is just as, if not more, critical for the improvement of working with parents. Both teachers and administrators are pressured to increase student achievement. Student achievement has been linked directly with parental involvement repeatedly yet both teachers and administrators lacked training in working with parents.

The shortage of training would explain why building principals rarely provided professional development for in-service teachers to learn to with parents.

Parent training is creating effective working relationships with parents. This was a general review of parent training in regard to effective working relationships with teachers. Parental involvement is a multi-faceted phenomenon. The need to train parents is a topic that has received some attention. However, parent training or parent education is scarce, particularly with parental involvement in the upper grades. Parents are perfectly capable of growth and development over time just like their children. Social support could improve parents' emotional resources for parental involvement. Historically, parents were just expected to take part in parental involvement and the training for that involvement or research studies on the topic was even more rare in comparison to the study of teacher training. According to Dinkmeyer and Muro (1971), "One of our major societal problems involves the fact that parents almost never have adequate experiences, training and educational background to enable them to function effectively in child training. As a result, many parents who are really largely unequipped, play the most significant role in the development of society." Sadly, little has improved in training parents to get involved.

Parents became involved in their children's education for four major reasons: 1) parents beliefs in being involved; 2) parents' efficacy: they believed that they had the skills and knowledge and their involvement would make a difference; 3) parents' perception that the teachers welcomed them; 4) parents believed that their child needed or wanted their involvement. The majority of research suggested that teachers should either initiate or take the lead role in the parent/teacher working relationship because they

are the professional and have some training. Factually, teachers received little training but regrettably, parents received even less training.

In reviewing literature on the specific topic of training parents for parental involvement, there was little to be discovered. In 1992, Kottman and Wilborn conducted a parent study group for 16 parents. They were put into eight groups of two parents each and they participated in six-weeks of two hour intensive training followed by ten weekly meetings after the training. Results showed that parents who participated in the training session had a more positive attitude toward school than parents who did not participate. Moreover, Fan and Chen (2001) found that parent expectations and aspirations had the largest impact on student achievement yet that important fact did not necessarily lead to more parental training.

A possible solution was discovered in an unrelated study. Sanders (2008) studied the gap between school and home with parent liaisons. She conducted a multi-year case study in four school districts between 2004-2006. She found that parent liaisons could create positive interactions between home and school if they had adequate training and support. Although her study did not speak to how parents were helped by the liaisons, it could be theorized that liaisons played a role in training or helping parents get more involvement in schools in a meaningful way.   This concept deserved further research.

As schools continue to work on improving parental involvement, the challenge would be the systematic study and incorporation of training for parents. Even if teacher and principal training were to improve, schools cannot afford to keep ignoring their most valuable and free resource-parents. After all, the body of research that does exist in parental involvement is clear. It would take both parents and teachers working together

for the purpose of improved student learning and achievement to see results. Parent

training is a topic that needed and deserved some immediate attention

Chapter summary

In the body of literature on parental involvement and its related topics, parental

involvement has shown to have definite positive correlation to student achievements.

However, the working relationship between teachers and parents is generally negative. In

addition, training teachers to work with parents is virtually non-existence.   Therefore, in

order to improve student achievement, the education community needs to change the

training of teachers in how they work and connect with parents.

In summary, literature in the areas of the impact of parent relationship on student

achievement; the four elements of effective working relationship with parents which are

building trust, communication, efficacy, the middle school years and the four elements of

training which are pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, administrators and parents

were reviewed. The goal and hope of this study is to gain knowledge about the steps on

the learning path of middle school teachers who are effective with parents. Any

contribution, contradiction, connection as well as any disconnect from the results of this

study in relation to the literature review will be discussed in chapter four and chapter five.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Teaching is a combination of methodology, pedagogy, content knowledge and the art of reaching people. A good teacher is someone who can deliver content that engages learning and stimulates the acquisition of knowledge, but a good teacher is also someone who is able to build solid working relationships with both parents and students. With ever-increasing attention and demands for teachers to be better trained to work with parents, research studies are needed on what is effective practice and how teachers learn to work with parents. This study identified middle school teachers who are highly effective in the area of working with parents and examined the steps of learning in their working relationship with parents as well as various experiences along with their recommended best practices. This study has established the research question as:

Building an effective working relationship with parents: What are the steps of learning for middle school teachers?

Research Design

This chapter serves the purpose of describing the methods that were used to conduct this research study. The main methodology in this study was a generic (basic) qualitative research with characteristics of a grounded theory approach. According to Merriam (2009), "In applied fields of practice such as education, administration, health, social work, counseling, business and so on, the most common type of qualitative research is a basic, interpretive study…. Since all qualitative research is interpretive, I

have come around to preferring labeling this type of study a *basic qualitative study*. A

central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in

interaction with their social world" (p. 22). In addition, Merriam (2009) also pointed out

that basic qualitative studies are usually interested in three main things. First, how people

interpret their experiences. Second, how the experiences construct in the participants'

worlds. Third, the meaning that participant attribute to their experiences. The general

purpose of a basic qualitative study is to understand how people make sense of their lives

and experiences….. Although this understanding characterizes all of the qualitative

research, other types of qualitative studies have an additional dimension. (p. 23).

Grounded theory aims to not only to understand how people make sense of their world

but to also build a theory around the phenomenon. However, since this was a basic

qualitative study rather than a grounded theory study, only fundamental features from

grounded theory were used in the data analysis but the study did not produce a theory

about the phenomenon.

   Qualitative research study

      Qualitative research is exciting and interesting because the qualitative data

provide rich information that goes beyond numbers, statistics and quantities (Mason,

2002, p.1). The strength of qualitative research is the generation of rich, detailed, valid

data from the participants' perspective (Streckler et al. 1992). Qualitative research is

characteristically exploratory, fluid and flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive

(Mason, 2002, p.24). Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research as "an inquiry process

of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a

social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes

words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting."

(p. 15). Moreover, qualitative research regularly produces explanations or arguments for

patterns and happenings (Mason, 2002, p.7).

On the other hand, quantitative research tends to collect large amounts of factual

and measureable data while qualitative research is more useful in gathering information

from daily experiences that require descriptions when facts and numbers alone are simply

insufficient. The effectiveness of teachers in the area of working with parents cannot be

measured merely by quantitative data. Of course, data can be gathered about things such

as frequency of emails or number of contacts which have been documented in other

quantitative research studies; however, the richness of the data comes from experiences

and insights that cannot be accounted for by numerical data only. After all, it is not the

number of conversations but the fruitfulness of the conversation that matters in the

working relationship between teachers and parents. Often, relationships cannot be

explained even by patterns from numerical data; rather, the numerical data only validates

their existence. As with all human relationships, details of the particular relationship are

important to learn more about the quality of the relationship. Much can be gained when

teachers share their stories about their effective working relationships with parents and

stories about their path in learning how to work with parents. Seidman (2006) quoted

Watkins (1985) in his book *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, "The root of word

stories is the Greek word, *histor,* which means one who is wise and learned." (p.7).

Telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process in which people tell stories where

they select details of their experiences from their stream of consciousness to share with

others.

Furthermore, it was difficult to quantify teachers and parents' philosophy, point of view, beliefs, experiences, roles and behaviors in depth. Studies showed that one of the most challenging issues of parental involvement is the lack of clearly defined roles for both teachers and parents as stated in chapter two. Herman (1998) found that the collaboration between parents, and teachers is hard to measure in quantitative terms. Since this researcher's goal is to understand the meaning-making of people who are involved in education, then qualitative research provide a necessary avenue of inquiry. After all, the body of knowledge in this field consisted mainly of quantitative data from previous research studies and the incorporation of qualitative data added to complement the current body of research. This was the rationale for selecting qualitative research rather than quantitative research.

This study aimed to examine how and what impacted expert teachers in their working relationship with parents and how best to prepare teachers to work with parents effectively. What difference might have existed in their trainings or learning experiences? The necessity for such questions has already been clearly established in numerous research studies reported in chapter two. Maxwell (2004) claimed that the reality and importance of *meaning*, along with physical and behavioral evidence, has explanatory significance to understanding the nature of the occurrence. The interviews in this study resulted in both unexpected data such as the frequency of communication through face-to-face conversations; but also expected data such as the lack of teacher training. The quantitative data, though also valuable, are secondary to the qualitative data that gives meaning to the study (Jeynes, 2005, Markow & Martin, 2005 & 2008, Bouffard, 2008, Adam, Forsyth & Mitchell, 2009). With the purpose of finding out what

impacted teachers in working effectively with parents, the meaning and significance from the qualitative data served to provide a more productive answer for future practice and training. This study sought to find what experiences, training, materials, supports and events helped create effective working relationships between teachers and parents, which is a topic that needs to be explored with qualitative research studies and particularly in the middle school setting.

Due to the fact that the specific one-on-one working relationship between middle school teachers and parents has not been widely studied, the call to systematically study the topic and develop theory is necessary. In order to make an appropriate choice for the specific design with the present study based on the research question, five traditions in qualitative research were considered: biographical research, Phenomenology, case study, ethnography and grounded theory. Each type of inquiry has its own distinct characteristics and purpose, and each naturally lent itself to the suitable methodology for any given qualitative research problem. First, a biographical study is "the study of an individual and her or his experience as told to the researcher or found in documents and archival material." (Creswell, 1998, p. 47). Biographical studies included all types of biographical approaches such as individual biographies, autobiographies, Life History and Oral History. This tradition required the researcher to focus on one individual and gather an extensive amount of information about him/her. The researcher needs to have a clear understanding of historical context in regards to the material to position the individual within the culture of the society and organize all of the stories around the pivotal events in the individual's life. Finally, the researcher needs to use an interpretive

approach to be able to bring him or her into the narrative and acknowledge his/her standpoint (Creswell, 1998, p.51).

Second, the purpose of a phenomenological study is to "describe the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon." (Creswell, 1998, p.51). This type of inquiry is meant to explore the structures of consciousness in human experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989) and search for the fundamental meaning of experiences. Phenomenological study requires the researcher to have a solid foundation in the philosophical precept of the phenomenon. Participants must be chosen from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Finally, the researcher must decide how he/she will introduce his/her own personal experience into the study. Phenomenological study was not chosen as the type of study because the working relationship between parents and teachers, particularly in middle school, is not topic that has been studied thoroughly. Although there are many similarities between phenomenological study and grounded theory, it was more appropriate to choose grounded theory to desribe and explain a phenomenon that is under study.

Third, a case study is "an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61).   This system is bounded by time and space because it is the case (a program, an event, an activity or individual) being studied. The data collection is extensive because case studies generally include documentation, archival records, interviews, observations, participant observations and physical artifacts. There are also numerous challenges to the case study tradition such as

finding boundaries for the case, deciding on single or multiple cases and establishing a rationale for purposeful sampling.

Fourth, an ethnographic study is a "description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system."   The researcher scrutinizes the group's learned patterns of behavior (Creswell, 1998, p. 58). Typically, the research will immerse him or her in the daily lives of the group to observe behavior, language, tension and artifacts (Spradley, 1980). This tradition requires the researcher to do substantial fieldwork to collect data through interaction with the group members. The goal of this type of inquiry is a holistic portrait of the group written in a story telling approach.

Grounded theory

While the approaches described so far did not fit the research question that guide the present study, a fifth approach, grounded theory is widely used in qualitative studies to develop a theory through data analysis. However, in this particular generic qualitative study, the grounded theory approach was mainly used for the analysis of data. Grounded theory study is "intended to generate or discover a theory, an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon that relates to a particular situation" (Creswell, 1998, p. 56). This type of inquiry characteristically requires interviews and other sources of data such as documents, letters, observations and focus group interviews that are generated from theoretical-sampling to saturate the categories grounded in the data. Grounded theory is intended to study how people act and react to a particular phenomenon.   Data analysis included a system of open, axial and selective coding. The researcher usually struggles with determining saturation for various categories; however, the end goal of this tradition is to generate a theory with specific components of central phenomenon, causal

conditions, strategies, conditions, contexts and consequences (Creswell, 1998, p. 58). Having said that, grounded theory approaches were only used in data analysis, as this is a basic qualitative study rather than a grounded theory study.

While the notion of understanding how people make sense of their lives and experiences is a common characteristic in all qualitative studies, a particular approach within generic qualitative research added dimension to the study. Grounded theory does not only seek for that understanding but also to build a theory about the phenomenon that is being studied (Merriam, 2009, p.23). The procedure of grounded theory is designed to integrate a set of concepts that will provide a theoretical explanation for a social phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory also seeks not only to reveal pertinent conditions but also to resolve how the actors respond to the changing conditions and the consequences of their behaviors (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In addition, Goulding (2002, p.55) says, grounded theory is particularly suitable when "the topic of interest has been relatively ignored in the literature or has been given only superficial attention."

Given that the topics of the preparation of teachers to work with parents and middle school parent/teacher relationships have both been relatively ignored in the body of literature, this fact supported the use of approaches from grounded theory. Moreover, grounded theory's data sources include all resources that yield information regarding social interaction. Observing and recording interactions, examining written documentation and literature, or obtaining perspectives from various people involved in the social interaction are all part of data collection of grounded theory (Byrne, 2001). Glaser and Strauss (1967) said that grounded theory is a theory that is derived from

everyday experiences such as interviews, documents, letters, artifacts and observations (p.96).

A generic qualitative research design with characteristics of grounded theory was suited for researching this topic because the intent of grounded theory was to generate or discover a theory closely related to the context of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998, p.55-56). According to Corbin & Strauss (1990, p.5), "The procedures of grounded theory are designed to develop a well integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study." In grounded theory, there are very specifically prescribed data collection procedures. One consideration is the need for a pilot study in order for the design of the study to be refined and improved with better structured questions (Thai, Chong & Agrawal, 2012). Another consideration is the balance between staying with the required criteria and being flexible during the actual research study. A third consideration is the on-going and interrelated process of collecting and analyzing the data. As soon as the data were collected, the data were transcribed and analyzed so that the information can be useful for the next interview (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The purpose of this practice is to arrive at theoretical saturation of categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Goulding 2002, Locke, 1996, Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data collection

Typically, there are four types of data sources: observations, interviews, documents/artifacts and audio-visual materials. Observation is field notes gathered by conducting observations as a participant, as an observer or as an "outsider" observing and than moving into the setting to observe as an "insider". Semi-structured interviews

consist of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allows the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). Documents are journals during a research study, a kept journal by participants, personal letters from participants, public artifacts such a memos, minutes, records, archival materials, autobiographies, biographies, photographs and videos. Audio-visual materials are physical trace evidence, videotapes of social or individual situations, photographs, collection of sounds, email and other electronic messages, possessions and objects. Among these data sources, interviews played a principal role in grounded theory studies. Since this researcher is an experienced middle school teacher who has strong working relationships with parents, this added an advantage to the rapport with other participants who are also effective middle school teachers in parental involvement.

For the purpose of this study, this researcher divided the study into two parts: Part one involved semi-structured interviews with middle school teachers who were identified as effective in working with parents by their building administrators. Part two involved focus group interviews with middle school student teachers that have recently completed or are currently student teaching. Prior to both parts of the study, pilot studies were conducted for the semi-structured interviews as well as the focus groups interviews for the purpose of refining the questions. Following the adjustment of interview questions, this researcher submitted a complete project proposal to the Instructional Review Board and was subsequently approved for the study.

Part one: Semi-structured interviews

According to Thai, Chong & Agrawal (2012), among all of the methods of data collection in qualitative studies, in-depth, semi-structured interviews are considered to be the most important data sources because these interviews tend to provide the researcher with the richer and deeper insights into complex phenomena from field experts. Other benefits of semi-structured interviews include easy replication. The interview can take place in various formats such as face to face or over the internet, it provides much more in-depth data than other data collection methods. Standardization of the interview questions increases the reliability of the study, and the opportunity exists to ask spontaneous questions. The strengths of interviews are targeted focus on the topic and insightful first-hand information.

This study began with administrators of middle schools from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds that recommended teachers who are highly effective in working with parents for the interview. Once identified, each teacher was sent a letter of invitation (See appendix A) to participate in an interview. The interviews were conducted with 18 middle school teachers, one at a time, from various public school districts in the mid-west. The reason for involving teachers from all three SES level schools was to see if the various SES (socio-economic status) schools yielded different and/or common data; therefore, the goal was to find the brutal data, which looked for elements that everyone had by finding what was universal and retain the common elements.

Prior to each interview, the participants were asked to complete two forms. One, participants filled out a consent form for participation (Appendix H) and two, participants also filled out an information sheet about their basic teaching history and demographic

information (Appendix C). The researcher had asked that the participants to gather relevant documents and artifacts that have significance in the working relationship between teachers and parents and some participants brought the documents to the interview. Even though the interviews could have been conducted in person, online (Skype, email) or by telephone, the ideal interview medium is in person. Therefore, this researcher conducted each interview in person in a mutually agreed upon setting where both the researcher and the subject were comfortable. Prior to the interview, this researcher had already sent and had the consent form completed by the participant. This researcher also asked each participant to bring along any relevant documents to share about his/her effective working relationship with parents. During the interviews, the researcher took notes and asked follow up questions for the purpose of clarification or for further information. The researcher asked for and collected the documents that each participant brought and asked the participant to elaborate on the effects of these documents on their working relationship with parents. It is important to note that this researcher aimed to analyze the data both from the interview and gathered documents as soon as possible after each interview in order to prepare for the next interview. However, this step did not happen between each interview. Factually, this step took place about every two to three interviews.

Each interview was digitally recorded with two recorders to be sure that no technical issues will cause the loss of an interview and then, the recording was transcribed by this researcher, as soon as possible following the interview. Every teacher's name and his/her school were changed in order to protect confidentiality. A matrix was set up to keep track of the actual teacher from the pseudonyms. The matrix

has been stored in a separate, locked compartment from the recordings for the protection

of the participants (Creswell, 1998, p. 134).

Semi-structured interview questions

1. What factors may have influenced your development in working with parents?

   Explain.

2. Have you experienced any major transformations in your life experiences,

   education or job in the area of working with parents? Explain.

3. By what process did you develop your effectiveness in working with parents?

4. If other teachers want to develop in the area of working with parents, what

   suggestions would you offer to them? Please cite actual examples from your

   own experiences in your explanation.

5. Any final thoughts before we conclude this interview?

Part two: Focus group interviews

While data from individual sources were collected in part I of this study through

semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews were the only means of data collection

from pre-service middle school teachers. Focus group interview is a qualitative method

that is meant to draw out descriptive data from various sub groups (Bender & Ewbank,

1994) and the idea behind focus groups is that a group interview will generate

explorations and clarity in data collection that would be otherwise missed in one-on-one

interviews (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299).

Focus group interviews are commonly used in applied research. There are many

advantages to a focus group interview. First, focus group interviews provide dynamic

information, attitudes and opinions in the context of the participants' exchanges that otherwise would not surface in an interview or survey (Morgan, 1988). People tend to be prompted to add to a conversation by a given phrase, a connection or a memory from someone else. It is not possible to create the same type and amount of prompts and stimulations between one participant and one researcher as it is with multiple participants. Second, focus group interviews often generate unstructured and natural views (Butler, 1996). Within a conversation, any given participant might forget a thought or two, but with multiple inputs in a group, one might make other connections or generate other thoughts by the sharing of others. Third, the group setting provided a safe forum to express one's personal views (Vaughn, Schumann & Sinagub, 1996). This is particularly true when the focus group is of a homogenous nature. People who shared similar backgrounds, life statuses or education, for example, are more likely to connect during a conversation. As an example, it was best to put student teachers who taught in similar SES schools in the focus group because the issues that stemmed from various SES schools tended to create a diverse student teaching experience. The common SES schools teachers had more to talk about with each other.

Fourth, participants may feel more supported and empowered to speak their minds (Goldman, 1962 & Peters, 1993). Conducted appropriately, focus group interviews will generate data that could never come from a single source in one-on-one interviews. People have a tendency to share something more personal or deeper if personal connections do not exist outside of the group. In other words, the lack of common life links often provides a sense of privacy to be more open. The combination of homogeneity and the anonymous nature of the focus group provided a positive

environment to share life experiences that is meant for learning. In addition, this researcher had good rapport and conduct during focus group interviews, she elicited more openness from participants. Fifth, focus group interview is an economical way to draw on several peoples' view all at once (Krueger and Casey, 1994).   This researcher was able to collect data from several people in approximately the same amount of time as one individual interview. The expense of both time and money were lessened with focus groups interviews in comparison to one-on-one interviews.

It is important to note that selection and design of the focus group interviews could deeply affect the reliability of the data. For that reason, there were a few considerations that were mandatory. First, the focus group interview should have a narrow and focused topic (Bender & Ewbank, 1994). The focus groups of this study were focused on path of learning in the area of working with parents for teachers. Second, the focus group interview should be a topic in which both the researcher and participants are interested (Bender & Ewbank, 1994). This researcher, as well as the student teacher participants, are all passionate about teaching middle school and care deeply about teacher training for parental involvement. Third, homogeneity affects the formation of data in comparison with group dynamics (Sim, 1997). In other words, commonality brings about a sense of shared experiences, language and understandings between participants. The "common ground" between participants is significant. Separating the participants by the SES of their student teaching school assignments increased the degree of homogeneity. Fourth, the moderation of the group discussion should be laden with the notion that the researcher is learning from the participants (Millward, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 1995). The goal of this researcher is to learn all

that she could to gain understanding on how teachers learned to work with parents. Fifth, the interaction between the participants should be stressed and not the interaction between the researcher and the group (Bender & Ewbank, 1994). The overall contribution from the researcher should remain between 5-10% at the most (Hague, 1993). In other words, the researcher should be "blended into the background" and allow the group participants do almost all of the talking except for stating the questions, ask some follow up/clarification questions and redirecting the conversation. Factually, this researcher contributed closer to 10-15% of the conversation yet blended in successful as a part of the conversation.

It was planned that this study would have three focus group interviews and each focus group interview would be composed of *six to ten* middle school pre-service student teachers from various local universities (Morgan, 1998, Stewart, & Shamdasani, 1990, Krueger & Casey, 1994, Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Prior to participation, directors of student teaching programs were contacted for permission and/or to help solicit participants. Once the student teachers agreed to participate, they were sent an introduction letter (Appendix B) and were asked to fill out two forms prior to the focus group interviews. One, a consent form (Appendix I) for participation and two, an information sheet (Appendix D) that was meant to collect demographic information from each middle school student teacher. Each participant was also asked to gather documents that were relevant to their working relationship with parents but none of the student teachers brought any documentation. Moreover, after multiple attempts, only a high SES and low SES student teacher focus groups were established. There were no participants in the middle SES student teacher focus group despite repeated attempts to contact both

student teaching directors as well as student teachers themselves. The reason for the lack of participation from this group was unclear.

The role of the researcher as the focus group interviewer as well as the dynamics of the group both have direct and serious implications for data collection. According to Bender & Ewbank (1994), the roles of the interviewer include conduct the discussion so the focus is not lost; draw out responses from the majority; ensure the group reflects the group interest rather than the researcher's interest yet merge into the conversation rather than dominate it. According to Sim (1998), the group dynamics of a focus group interview are central to the success of data collection. Potential problems of the focus group dynamics include the shyness or aggressiveness of participants, dominance in conversation, diversity and consensus and the suppression or exaggeration of some points of view. This is why the researcher's conduct and management of the focus group are critical to the entire data collection process.

Each focus group, from this study, met at a restaurant that had a private area so that the researcher could ensure the quality of the recording with multiple voices. A meal was provided and was meant to provide a more relaxed and comfortable environment for conversation and thanked the participants for their time and input (Bender & Ewbank, 1994). Each focus group also included an independent note taker during the meeting to allow this researcher to completely focus on mood-rating the group rather than taking notes. The role of the note taker is not to be underestimated. His/her responsibility was to take notes such as the order in which participants spoke and recorded non-verbal behaviors of the group. In this study, the designated note taker created a matrix that matched up the participant to an assigned name such as "Jennifer is student teacher A."

He/she created diagrams (seating chart) and recorded the speaking order of participants in the notes. The note taker also created nametags and nameplates for each participant to help keep track of the interview conversation. These simple steps helped ensure the accuracy of the transcription after the focus group interview because it was clear who was speaking.

Seating chart for the focus group interview:

A	B	Researcher	Note taker	C

D	E	F	G
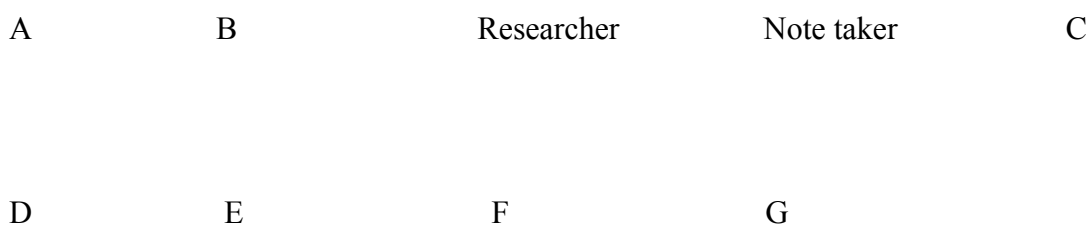
Recording chart for the order of speaking during the focus group interview:

Participant	Start of each sentence….
R:	Welcome, we will…..
G:	I wanted to share…..
B:	What do you mean when you said….
A:	Oh, I had a similar experience when….
E:	I know, I had a parent who…..

This researcher used the same note taker for both focus group interviews and preserved the consistency of training, experience, note taking and structure of the interviews. In addition, each focus group interview was digitally recorded with two recorders to prevent any possible loss of a record of the group interview due to technical issues. This researcher transcribed the recording, from each focus group interview, as soon as possible after the interview. All the names of the participating student teachers and his/her school name were changed in order to maintain confidentiality. A matrix for each focus group was set up to keep track of the actual teacher name from the

pseudonyms for each focus group.   The matrices were stored in a separate, locked

compartment from the recordings for the protection of the participants. Prior to meeting

the focus groups, the information forms (See appendix D) were used by this researcher to

form various focus groups with the highest possible homogeneity.   The focus group

questions were designed to help answer the research question by asking for data that

related to the steps of learning to work with parents as student teachers.

Focus group questions

1. Tell me what specific skills/lessons did you learn about working with parents
   in your student teaching assignment experience?

2. Share with me about your preparation in working with parents from your
   university course work or field experiences prior to your student teaching
   assignment.

3. What else do you think would have been helpful to you in terms of working
   with parents and why?

4. If you could change anything about your experiences (course work,
   requirements, field-experiences, observations, student teaching…etc.), which
   would make you feel more prepared to work with parents, what would you
   change? What would you keep the same? Why or why not?

5. What are your final thoughts (round robin sharing)?

Sampling

The purposeful selection of participants is a key component in qualitative research

studies. Explicit rationale and criteria were used in this study for the selection of

participants. In a grounded theory study, the researcher is aiming to find groups or individuals, documents or events that represent the phenomenon that is being studied (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). According to Patton (1990, p.169-186), there are 16 strategies for purposeful sampling: maximum variation, homogeneous group, critical case, theory-based, confirming and disconfirming cases, snowball or chain, extreme or deviant case, typical case, intensity, politically important case, random purposeful, stratified purposeful, criterion, opportunistic, combination or mixed and convenience. For grounded theory, they recommend, "theory based" where the researcher chooses participants based on their ability to contribute to the developing theory. This is what is referred to as "theoretical sampling" in grounded theory which is short for "sampling on theoretical grounds" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). For the purpose of the semi-structured interviews, the main criterion for the selection of practical field experts for the semi-structured interviews was middle school teachers who are considered highly effective in working with parents because "the researcher needs to understand behaviors as the participants understand it, learn about their world, learn their interpretation of self in the interaction, and share their definitions" (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986, p.7).

For the purpose of the focus group interviews, whether the student teachers knew each other was not a main consideration because both scenarios of participants knowing each other compared to not knowing each other brought benefits to the focus group interviews. It was also impossible to know ahead of time of the focus group interviews which of the participants already knew each other. Since each focus group were made up of student teachers from various universities, it was not likely that they already know each other. However, some of the student teachers did know each other in some

capacity. The sampling of participants was done based on the specific needs of the study (Bender & Ewbank, 1994), hence the selection of middle school teachers and middle school student teachers because this study is an investigation of a unique phenomenon specific to middle schools.

Part I. In part I of the study, letters were sent to public middle school principals (See Appendix G) for their recommendation of teachers in their building whom they considered highly effective with parents. For the purpose of this study, letters were sent to various (high, middle and low) SES schools and each administrators were asked to, as far as possible, select teachers for this study from each (6th, 7th and 8th) grade level. This researcher began with sampling by the first criterion, which is socio-economic status of the middle school in which they taught. She identified and selected six teachers from each type of the SES (high, middle and low) middle schools. The criterion for high, middle and low SES schools were defined in the *Operational definition of terms* section of chapter one. Since the body of research did not provide a clear representation for a second criterion, this researcher selected different grade levels for the second criterion. The rationale for this second criterion was because students of each grades in middle school (6th, 7th & 8th) have very unique needs based on the rapid and ever-changing adolescent stages; therefore, grade level teachers' working relationship with parents may vastly differ because of the age difference and maturity.

Part II. In part II, the first criterion was selecting middle school (public schools only) student teachers. Invitation letters (See Appendix J) were sent to directors and coordinators at various universities' student teaching programs to recruit individuals who are currently involved in or have just completed student teaching in a middle school

during the previous semester. The directors asked for participants on behalf of this

researcher. The goal was to gather approximately the same amount of participants for

each focus group interview.   Each student teacher was sent an introductory letter

(Appendix B) and was also asked to fill out a consent form (Appendix I) in order to

participate in the study. Student teachers were then asked to fill out an information sheet

(See Appendix D) that contained a variety of demographic questions and returned to the

researcher. The purpose of the focus group interviews is to have an open dialog based on

a set of questions about their individual and collective perspectives on the effectiveness

of teachers' working relationship with parents and their own learning and development in

this area during student-teaching. Each focus group was created with as much

homogeneity as possible.

In the sampling process, for the purpose of adding to the homogeneity to the focus

groups, a second criterion was needed and a variety of factors were considered. One of

these factors was the university where each student teacher was enrolled. Each university

has its own requirements and philosophical influences and therefore, separating the focus

group interviews by universities would not have been an ideal second criterion. Another

possibility was by grade levels, which would have been a good choice as the second

criterion because the data would also be complimentary to the semi-structured interviews.

However, it would have been difficult to select participants based on the grade level

because student teachers did not always get a choice in their student teaching

assignments. In addition, the criteria of subjects taught or core subjects versus elective

subjects could have provided interesting data but it would be nearly impossible to find six

to ten student teachers of the same subject. Similar issues would have been true for race

and age. Genders of the teachers would have only provided the study with two focus groups and therefore, not epitome.

After a process of debate and justification, the SES level of middle school where the student teachers taught was chosen as the second criterion for the focus group interview. The underlying reason was the fact that student teaching in a high SES middle school greatly differ from student teaching in a low SES middle school.   Since their student teaching experience would be vastly different, it was logical to group the student teachers into high, middle and low SES group as the criterion for the three focus groups. This was another avenue to keep the homogeneity level as high as possible.   The added benefit of this grouping was the complimentary data comparison between the semi-structure interviews and focus group data.

Data analysis

The first step to data analysis is comparing the transcription of the recordings and hand-written notes to fill in any gaps. This was a particularly important step to carry out with the note taker from the focus group interviews to best understand the mood and tone of each interview. After this vital step was completed, this researcher was finally ready for the second step, the formal analysis. The purpose of grounded theory data analysis is the discovery of concepts behind the actualities and categorizing of the concepts and linking those categories to develop a theory (Thai, Chong & Agrawal, 2012). The data analysis strategies were applied to both semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews.

Coding is a fundamental analytic process for qualitative research with characteristics of grounded theory design. Since data collection and data analysis are interrelated processes, analysis is necessary from the start and after each interview because what is learned will be used to direct the next interview (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Step one is *open coding* where the researcher broke down the data analytically. In other words, the researcher delineated categories from detailed scrutiny of the data. After an interview has been fully transcribed, data were broken down by specific events, ideas, acts, occurrences for the purpose of comparing their similarities and differences. Each line of text from the transcription would be labeled by a set of codes as they developed. Data would be organized based on content and similarities and using "tentative label" reading line by line, the transcript of each interview were reviewed with a constant comparative approach in order to look for similarities as well as differences. This constant comparative approach is layered with constant comparison between code and code, code and concept, concept and concept, concept and categories, and categories and categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Categories and "how categories vary in different identified dimensions", is one of the strategies of open coding (Thai, Chong & Agrawal, 2012). An assortment of events and actions are compared for similarities and differences. Another strategy of opening coding is to breakdown the data in order for pre-conceived notions and ideas to be scrutinized against the actual data. By constant and systematic comparisons, errors will be eliminated because the data will be arranged in the appropriate categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, as interviews are analyzed, the number of codes should progressively trim down as the phenomenon becomes more apparent to the researcher. This happens because the codes are grouped

into concepts by similarity and concepts are merged into broader and more abstract

categories (Thai, Chong & Agrawal, 2012).

In this study, this researcher transcribed the recordings from the interviews. After

printing, this researcher read through the transcripts initially with a pencil underlining

frequent ideas. It is important to note that using a pencil was purposeful to avoid

establishing categories prematurely. During the second reading of the transcripts, this

researcher began coding to create categories. An initial hand-written matrix was created

to organize the categories with the sections of transcripts that validated each of those

categories. This researcher kept analyzing the transcripts until there was no additional

information that belonged in each category was found. The initial matrix was revised

throughout the analysis. At first, six categories were developed and this research began

to establish sub-categories within each category. As an example, within the large amount

of data that discussed communication, this researcher decided to split the larger category

of communication into two smaller categories of, a) communication tools for the purpose

of discussing each of the tools (Phone call, email, website/technology/internet, face-to-

face conversation, other tools and preferred tools by teachers) and how they impacted

teachers' work with parents and, b) approaches to communication for the purpose of

discussing how the tools were utilized by teachers (Positive communication, balance

usage of mixed tools, listening and asking for help). At the end of opening coding, this

researcher established the final eight categories.

In *axial coding*, "the researcher identifies a central phenomenon, explores causal

conditions, specifies strategies, identifies the context and intervening conditions, and

delineates the consequences for this phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p.57).   Moreover,

the focus of axial coding is to relate the categories and sub-categories at the level of properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Properties are characteristics or attributes of categories and sub-categories. Dimensions is a continuum or range in which the property can be placed, like "hot to cold" for the property "temperature" or "heat". The next step is to note the dynamic interrelationships between categories to form the basis for the construction of the theory. During this process, the researcher might use her experiences to help create some hypothetical relationships, but those will be provisional until it has been verified repeatedly against all incoming data to be sure the hypothesis holds up. The ones that do not survive the process will need to be amended or removed. Any single incident or occurrence is not adequate to support or discard a hypothesis. In other words, each code must be scrutinized and every hypothesis must be indicated by data repeatedly (Corbin & Strauss, 1900). Afterwards, the researcher would form a more precise explanation on how the categories are related by *why, where, when, whom, how and with what results* (Thai, Chong & Agrawal, 2012).

Properties and dimensions were needed to relate the categories and subcategories from opening and axial coding. As an example, the personal experiences category had four subcategories: being a parent, other jobs, childhood experiences, circumstances of friends and family. The property of being a parent was significant yet it did not explain why participants who were not parents were also effective. From the data, it was clear that having been a parent prior to becoming a teacher made a significant impact as one of the circumstances of being a parent, the other was being a parent of a special needs child. These two circumstances made more impact in how teachers worked with the parents at

their school in comparison to being parents of young children or children without special needs.

The last part of coding is *selective codin*g and in this part, the purpose is for the researcher to integrate categories from axial coding to build a theory (Creswell, 1998, p.57).   The process is meant to relate categories found in axial coding to a core category that represents the central phenomenon of the research study (Thai, Chong & Agrawal, 2012). Each category and subcategories that are connected to the core category must have conceptual intensity in order for the developed theory to have explanatory power (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Selective coding is completed when the researcher reaches this stage in the process.   Selective coding also concentrates on elaborating and describing the preceding findings and refining categories to include variations for the purpose of establishing a theoretical framework (Chen, Wu, Cheng & Hsueh, 2011). The goal is to systemically find the full range of variation in the phenomenon under examination and analysis.

In this study, this researcher identified the *approaches to communication* category as the central phenomenon. The working relationship between middle school teachers and parents is not a simply concept but the journey of learning started with nearly all middle school teachers not having any training to work with parents before or during their teaching careers. During this step of coding, this researcher was able to discover that *the lack of training* caused teachers to have fear and anxiety to work with parents and therefore, teachers tended to fall back on their *personal experiences* and *various methods of learning* on the job. The availability of communication tools alone was not sufficient for teachers; it was how teachers chose to approach their communication that made them

effective with parents. Within their work with parents, teachers used the combination of *communication tools*, *support from various personnel from school* and *teachers' own beliefs*, both professional and personal to sustain their work. The categories are interrelated as stated. (The categories are italicized to make the relationship between categories clearer.)

Research ethics

Confidentiality

The identity of all participants, in both parts of the study, was kept confidential. In Part I, the subject names and places of employment was a part of the researcher's notes and codes. The matrix that matched the participants was kept on a password-protected file at the researcher's personal computer at her residence. The same protection was used to keep the transcripts confidential. Digital recordings were stored in a locked safe at the home of the researcher and will be destroyed at the end of the study.

Although participants in Part II of the study could not be fully anonymous, as they were visible to each other during the focus group, only their first names were shared. The moderator provided general information about the backgrounds of the group members, without identifying, which individuals belong to which university. In this study, some of the participants in the focus groups did know each other. For that reason, focus group participants were asked during the recruitment process and again during the group itself that contents and participants of the group session remain confidential to the group. Again, the matrix that matched the identity of the focus group participants, their made up names in the transcripts as well as the note taker's record of the order in which they

spoke were kept on a password-protected file at the researchers personal computer at her residence. The same protection was used to keep the transcripts confidential. Digital recordings were stored in a locked safe at the home of the researcher and will be destroyed at the end of the study. Finally, all of the related documents that were submitted by each participant in the semi-structured interview as well as the focus groups have no names of teachers, schools, students or their parents/guardians. All participants were asked to remove all names prior to bringing and submitting the documents for the study's collection. Again, these documents will be destroyed after the completion of the study.

Validity and reliability

The standards by which a qualitative study is judged as successful has potential consequences because qualitative studies take place in a social world and the results can affect people's lives. Miles and Huberman (1994, p.277) suggested five main quality criteria to consider: objectivity/confirmability; reliability/dependability/auditability; internal validity/credibility/authenticity; external validity/transferability/fittingness and utilization/application/action orientation.

First, objectivity/confirmability refer to neutrality, minimizing bias and replicability. Some of the critical issues include a systematic collection, process and transformation for specific conclusion; a record of methodology; the researcher's awareness of personal bias; the ability to re-analyze the data and the consideration of conclusions from similar studies.

Second, reliability/dependability/auditability refer to the consistency of the process of the study. Some of the critical issues include a clear research question; the

congruency between the research question and the design of the study; clarity of basic parameters; agreement between multiple field workers and coders; and quality check on data.

Third, internal validity/credibility/authenticity refer to the credibility of the findings from the study. Some of the critical issues include plausibility for readers; whether triangulation with complementary data source leads to converging conclusions; whether data links to prior emerging theory; the internal coherence of the findings; identification of uncertain areas; consideration for rival explanations; and the replication of findings in other databases.

Fourth, external validity/transferability/fittingness refer to the ability to transfer the conclusion of a study to other context. Some of the critical issues include three levels of generalization from sample to population, analytic and case to case transfer (Firestone, 1993); the presence of a more abstract explanation of described actions and interpreted meanings (Maxwell, 1992); three distinguishing generalization of "what is", "what may be" and "what could be" (Schofield, 2002).

Fifth, utilization/application/action orientation refers to "The ultimate test of the credibility of an evaluation report is the response of decision makers and information users to that report." (Patton, 1990, p.469). Some critical issues include whether the results of the studies help people to be more aware and empower them to corrective actions for the inequitable or oppressed; the question of who benefits or gets harmed by the study; the accessibility of the findings to potential users; the level of usability of the findings and whether the actions from the findings actually help solve problems. Moreover, Miles and Huberman (1984) stressed the importance of careful documentation

and an auditable trail for peers and colleagues. The provisions that were put in place in

this study to meet the quality standards will be discussed in detail in chapter five.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this research study is to ask the teachers who are effective in the area of working with parents about their experiences, training, materials, events and resources that help them work more effectively with parents and also help them encourage appropriate and effective working relationships between parents and teachers. The study has collected data from these teachers who are effective in the area of working with parents and will analyze their training, experiences and best practices. In addition, the study also researched the needs of middle school student teachers to find out what can be improved in their training in the area of working with parents. The purpose of this chapter is the overview of the introduction of the participants, category development and conclusion.

Research question

Building an effective working relationship with parents: What are the steps of learning for middle school teachers?

Participants in semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interviews consisted of middle school teachers whom their administrators considered effective in their working relationships with their parents over time. Among the 18 participants, six of them were from high SES (socio-economic status) public schools, six of them were from middle SES public schools and six of them were from low SES public schools. (See table 1 for the demographic data on the participants).

Table 1: Demographics of teachers in the semi-structured interviews

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Gender	F	M	M	M	M	F	F	F	M	M	F	F	F	F	F	M	M	M
Ethnicity	W	W	W	W	W	A	W	W	W	W	W	W	W	W	W	B	W	W
Grades taught	6-8	6,8	8	6	6,8	6	6-8	5,6	6	6	7	8	7	6	6-8	6-8	7,8 10	7
Age Group	21-30	21-30	31-40	31-40	31-40	21-30	41-50	31-40	51-60	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	41-50	60-65	31-40	16-25	21-30
Subject taught	PE	M	S	SS	M, LA	SS	VM	5th E 6S	SS, EC	S	LA	LA	S	W	EL	M	LA	SS
Years of teaching	6-15	6-15	6-15	6-15	6-15	6-15	16-25	6-15	6-15	0-5	16-25	16-25	16-25	16-25	35-40	6-15	16-25	0-5
Education Level	M	B	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	D	M	M	M	B	M	M
Certification	K-12/ PE /H	5-9 M	EC H K-6/ 5-9 S	5-9 LA/ SS 6-12 SS	K-6, AD M	6-12 LA/ SS	K-12 VM	EC H/ K-6 S	SS, LA	5-9S 9-12 CH , B	L A L B	5-9 L A K-9 A D	7-12 S	G	K-6, LA 5-9 EL R AD	6-12 M	6-12 LA	5-9 L A SS M
SES school level	H	H	L	L	L	H	M	M	M	M	M	M	H	H	H	L	L	L
School Enroll-ment	401 - 600	401 - 600	201 - 400	201 - 400	201 - 400	401 - 600	601 - 800	601 - 800	401 - 600	401 - 600	601 - 800	601 - 800	801 - 1000	801 - 1000	801 - 1000	0-200	0-200	0-200
Are you a Parent?	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N
Personal SES background	M	M	M	M	M	M	L	M	H	M	M	M	M	N/A	M	M	M	L

Gender: F=female, M=male
Ethnicity: W= Caucasian, B = Black, A= Asian, L= Latino, O=Others
Subjects taught: M=Math, LA= Language arts, S= Science, SS = Social studies, PE=
Physical education, VM= Vocal Music, H= health, EC = Economics, CH=Chemistry, B=
Biology, LB= Library, W= Writing, EL= English language learner. R= Reading
Education level: B= Bachelors, M = Masters, D = Doctorate

Certification: E= Elementary, MS = Middle school, HS=High school, AD= administration, G= Gifted
SES (socio-economic status) levels: H= high, M= middle, L= low
Parent? Y= yes, N=no

Introduction of participants from semi-structured interviews

In the process of conducting the semi-structured interviews, I met a group of teachers that are truly passionate about their work with parents. As a group, they were enthusiastic, professional, supportive and genuinely cared about contributing to the research topic. One of the participants offered to help me find participants to interview while others offered to meet with me on their own time and made sure our schedules worked. A few participants even greeted me at the front door of their school, which gave me a very positive first impression as to why they are successful in the area of working with parents.

The participants were eager to share their own learning journey in hopes of changing the current training system. Many of them came prepared to not only talk about how they learned to work with parents but also brought some documents to support what they shared; however, not all participants shared documents. Some of these documents included samples of emails, communication logs, newsletters and good news note cards while other teachers shared the links to their school teacher website (e-documents) that contained an abundance of information that was easily accessible to both parents and students. Their collective knowledge taught me a great deal not only about working with parents but they also provided many innovative ideas that will add positively to the future training of teachers. The variation in the demographics of the group only enriched the data collection. It was most fascinating to hear about their collective experiences in or outside of teaching and how those combined experiences impacted their work with

parents. Each of them had little hesitation to share with me about their own journey of learning and mastering the art of building an effective working relationship with parents. Even if I were not conducting formal research, it would have been a joy just to listen to them. As a whole, I could not have asked for a more cooperative and helpful group of participants.

As individuals, each of them brought their own uniqueness to the interview. Examples included two participants who were former administrators while two other participants became parents before they ever became teachers; three of 18 (16.6%) participants have experienced all three SES levels of schools in their lifetime while five of 18 (27.7%) of the participants have only taught in the same SES as their own background. One participant openly identified himself as a homosexual, two were single while most of them were married; two of the participants have taught less than five years while the oldest participant taught for nearly four decades. Even so, each of them brought one or more thought-provoking ideas or concepts. Although some of the content of the interviews seemed alike at times, I can say that no two interviews were truly similar. As a matter of fact, the combination of similarities and differences added richness to the data. For the purpose of confidentiality, each participant will be given a pseudonym.

All in all, it was an energizing and invigorating process to spend time talking with each of these teachers who are so passionate and committed. I found myself more and more enthusiastic about the topic as the process went along because I, as the researcher, was doing most of the learning. It was also exhilarating to be with some of the best from our profession. Their passion for their work was not only contagious, their dedication made me proud to be in the same line of work. Most important, it gave me hope (both as

a researcher and a devoted middle school teacher) that a better way to train teachers to work with parents is on the horizon.

Participant #1. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mrs. Green. Mrs. Green is an elective teacher from high socio-economic status middle school of 600. She is Caucasian and grew up with parents who were teachers. Mrs. Green is also a brand new mother of a toddler and an aunt of a special needs nephew. Mrs. Green is certified to teach P.E. and health for K-12. She teaches all three (6th/7th/8th) grades PE and she has taught less than ten years but spread out in three different schools. Currently, her school is under construction so she does not have a classroom, gym or an on-site field. Mrs. Green also does not have an office phone, therefore, she is very much challenged not only in teaching P.E without any space but also in her communication with parents by phone. However, since each teacher does have a school issued laptop, she is able to freely communicate with parents via email. Mrs. Green is a relatively young teacher but clearly, she is talented in her work with parents. Her continued quest and enthusiasm to improve her work with parents as well as with students are admirable. In talking with her, I was most impressed with the wisdom she had, in handling delicate issues, with her approach towards parents. She is completely unafraid to discuss sensitive topics that can occur in PE classes. She was able to communicate her thoughts clearly, she maintained eye contact at all times and I was able to process the information she shared.

Participant #2. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mr. Peterson. Mr. Peterson is a core teacher from a high socio-economic status middle school of 600. He is Caucasian and currently teaches 8th grade math and he has taught

less than ten years all in one school. In previous years, he also taught 6th grade math so

he has the unique perspective of transition grades into and out of middle school. He is

certified to teach math 5-9th grades. Mr. Peterson is a father of a 1.5 year-old toddler.

He came from a family of five siblings and a family of teachers (two siblings and his

wife). Mr. Peterson is all about continuous learning not only with teaching pedagogies

but also with improving his working relationship with parents. He has high standards for

his students, their parents as well as for himself. He is willing to ask questions, seek

advice from veteran teachers and approach parents with challenging issues such as long-

term struggles of his students in mathematics. Mr. Peterson is also heavily involved in

chess, math contests and private tutoring and because of such involvement; he has a large

number of parental relationship both inside and outside of school. The entire interview

time was filled with laughter and positive energy.

Participant #3. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mr.

Donaldson.   Mr. Donaldson is a core teacher from a low socio-economic status middle

school of 300. He is Caucasian and father of a young child. He has taught 8th grade

science for about ten years and he is highly focused on how to use technology in the

classroom (120 hours of training) and he has selected some of the technical tools, from

his training, to use with parental communication. Though he did not come from a family

with a wealth of teaching background, he felt like he has figured out how to best utilize

technology to stay in touch with parents and engage parents in a community where

education is not always valued. Where most see the lack of access to computers and the

internet of lower income families as an issue, Mr. Donaldson's focus on the usage of

smart phones to both communicate with parents as well as students is a unique yet

effective approach. He seemed a little uncomfortable at times and I was not sure why but he was clear on the points that he really valued.

Participant #4. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mr. Ballwin. Mr. Ballwin is a core teacher from a low socio-economic status middle school of 300. He is Caucasian and he is not a parent. Mr. Ballwin is a one out of three participant who had the unique experience of growing up in a middle SES middle school as a student, student taught in a high SES middle school and is now teaching in a low SES middle school. Mr. Ballwin teaches 6thgrade social studies and he has taught less than ten years, all at the same school. He has taken the lead in his school in resolving some discipline as well as logistics issues to help the school run smoothly. He seemed to be the leader in 6th grade in his school. He took notice of issues that were not a focus for other teachers and found ways to be supportive to parents, colleagues and students. His sense of enthusiasm along with leadership and a keen sense in logistics offered a combination of skills that is a gift to his school. He was particularly excited about this research topic and was eager to share his input about engaging with parents even in the most challenging circumstances. He was the participant who was so excited about the topic that he even reached out and arranged for other participants.

Participant #5. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith is a core teacher from a low socio-economic status middle school of 300. He is Caucasian and not a parent. Mr. Smith teaches 6thgrade literacy and he has taught less than ten years. He has two unique experiences, one is having taught both mathematics and literacy; the other is growing up in the district that he is currently teaching in, and that experience provided some unique insights. He offered a lot of

perspectives in the skills that he acquired through his work before he became a teacher. Mr. Smith coaches and has a lot of community contact because of that. He is also positively happy to give back to the community where he grew up. His gentle spirit did not hide the fact of his devotion to this school. It was uplifting and joyful to interview him.

Participant #6. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mrs. Fuller. Mrs. Fuller is a core teacher from a high socio-economic status middle school of 600. She is the only participant who is Asian. Mrs. Fuller is a mother of early elementary age twins. She teaches 6th grade literacy and social studies and she has taught less than ten years. She is one out of three participants who had experienced all three SES environments because she grew up in a middle SES family, taught in a more challenging inner city urban school and now she is in a highly regarded suburban, established and wealthy middle school. She is able to combine her childhood experiences as a student with her diverse teaching experiences to promote social justice in her school. She was most excited to talk about how to connect with parents in hopes that it will not only increase communication but also support parents for the fairest educational experience possible for all students. Mrs. Fuller is impressive in her ability to deliver an important message with such a gentle demeanor.

Participant #7. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mrs. Coats. Mrs. Coats is an elective teacher from a middle socio-economic status middle school of 800. She is Caucasian and a single mother of two teenagers, one of whom has some special needs. During her own childhood, she witnessed her mother working with her sister's teachers due to the fact that her sister struggled in school. She teaches 6th, 7th

and 8th grades vocal music and she has been teaching for nearly twenty years. She started

her teaching career not only teaching vocal music but also running a booster club;

therefore, she offered another viewpoint in working with parents. In addition, as a parent

who has struggled with her own special needs child, she was able to offer the empathy

that is clearly needed to be effective with parents. I was greatly touched by her openness

and honesty in sharing her own struggles. She is able to point out the celebratory and the

supportive arenas of teaching and she is also able to reach both parents and students with

that demeanor.

Participant #8. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mrs.

Benson. Mrs. Benson is a core teacher from a middle socio-economic status middle

school of 800. She is Caucasian and she is not a parent but Mrs. Benson's mother was a

teacher of young children. She teaches 6th grade science and she has taught less than ten

years. Mrs. Benson came from teaching 5th grade in elementary in the same school

district and provided insightful data on transition to middle school. Not only was she

more than enthusiastic and full of energy, she had a lot to offer with her understanding of

the needs of elementary students and how to support parents as they move forward with

their children to a successful experience in the middle school. It was very clear that she

is a natural with teaching and with people. That was evident during the entire interview.

Participant #9. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mr.

Matthews. Mr. Matthews is a core teacher from a middle socio-economic status middle

school of 600. He is Caucasian and a father of three teenage and college age children,

one of them is with special needs. He teaches 6th grade social studies and has taught less

than ten years. Mr. Matthews came from a business background and since he is older, he

was one of only two participants that did not become a teacher until well after he became a parent; therefore, his learning to work with parents differed from the typical 22-year-old student teacher's experience. Although he is older, he was willing to learn and accept help from colleagues, even younger colleagues. I admired such awareness and humility. Mr. Matthews was open and sincere in sharing his own struggles and learning as a father and is also able to use that level of understanding to relate to parents effectively. His focus on continuing to learn, to improve and to be open to work with parents is inspirational. Mr. Matthews dressed in a business-like manner, he waited for and greeted me at the front office; and his sense of "customer service" was the perfect combination of warmth and sincerity. He was the only participant that gave out his cell phone number and welcomed calls from parents on his cell phone.

Participant #10. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mr. Simon. Mr. Simon is a core teacher from a middle socio-economic status middle school of 600. He is Caucasian and not a parent. He teaches 6th grade science and has taught less than five years in two different states. He was one of the youngest of all of the participants so his perspective is very recent and fresh. He was also the only one who had any formal training in his schooling (one class) in working with parents. Even though he has only taught for three years, he was able and ready to offer some amazing suggestions to improve on training teachers to work with parents. He was eager to learn from the veteran teachers and sought to acquire their skills. He seemed a little anxious to share his thoughts at first but once we got talking and I assured him that our interview was confidential, he was very sure about what he had to say.

Participant #11. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mrs. Long. Mrs. Long is a core teacher from a middle socio-economic status middle school of 800. She is Caucasian and a mother of three school age children. Her first degree was in physical therapy. Mrs. Long teaches 7th grade literacy and she has taught for nearly twenty years. She was cheerful, professional and clear on what is expected of her. I can see why her interaction with parents would be well received. Even though she was not fancy nor does she seem to have a naturally charismatic personality, Mrs. Long best represented her school and her work by her consistent professionalism. I could see how her consistency brought a sense of security and comfort to parents.

Participant # 12: For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Dr. Stevenson. Dr. Stevenson is a core teacher from a middle socio-economic status middle school of 800, she was the only participant that had earned her doctoral degree as well as being the only participant who has both been a teacher and administrator of both elementary and middle schools. Dr. Stevenson is Caucasian, a mother of two teenagers who attended her school, and is married to a superintendent. She teaches 8th grade literacy and she has the very rare profile of teaching, being an administrator and then going back into the classroom. Since she used to supervise and coach teachers in the area of working with parents, she had a lot of data from different positions to offer. Her unique combined perspectives of administration, elementary and middle school as well as parenting gave her work a lot of credibility. Her greatest gift was absolutely no hesitation in sharing her knowledge and coaching others to do better. My only struggle was following a complete thought from her because she switched her thoughts on and off between sentences during the interview.

Participant #13. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mrs. Paul. Mrs. Paul is a core teacher from a high socio-economic status middle school of 1000. She is Caucasian and a mother of three adult children. She teaches 7th grade life science and she has taught for nearly twenty years. Mrs. Paul was the second participant who became a teacher after she was well into parenthood, as well as being a former college instructor of teachers of biology. She was very enthusiastic and encouraging in the research of this topic, as she also believed in the importance of training teachers to work with parents effectively. She spent much of her early days as a "volunteer room mother" in her children's classrooms. Mrs. Paul greeted me at the school office. She was probably the most encouraging teacher that I interviewed. Not only did she take the time to talk with me, she gave me personal encouragement about the research several times and even invited me to come back and share what I have learned.

Participant #14. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mrs. Darcy. Mrs. Darcy is a core teacher from a high socio-economic status middle school of 1000. She is Caucasian and a mother of a teenager. She teaches 6th grade writing and she has taught for over twenty years. Mrs. Darcy's response to me during the interview was fast, direct and relatively short. She had the most serious and negative demeanor among all of the participants. She did not take the time to elaborate on her points. Mrs. Darcy's strength was clearly in communicating factual information to both parents and students on her teacher website. Her expectations were abundantly clear, yet I did not sense a strong sense of warmth from her. Mrs. Darcy had clear and strong boundaries between her professional and personal lives.

Participant #15. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mrs. Rhodes. Mrs. Rhodes is a core teacher from a high socio-economic status middle school of 1000. She is Caucasian and she is not a parent. Mrs. Rhodes is one of the three participants who grew up in a middle SES family and taught in low, middle and high SES schools in several very different environments. She teaches 6th, 7th and 8th grade EL reading and she has taught for almost forty years in three different states. She was the only participant, other than Dr. Stevenson, who had certification in administration; she was assistant head in a private elementary school for a few years in the mid-west. I found myself feeling easy and comfortable around her. Mrs. Rhodes had a way of sharing information and yet bringing not only the personal aspect into the conversation but also her feelings, her emotions and her pure joy in learning from every place and experience she had. I could see why parents would be comfortable talking with her. She took time to really think about what she had to say, regardless of the positive or negative nature of the information; she was consistently warm and giving in her sharing during our interview.

Participant # 16. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mr. Moses. Mr. Moses is a core teacher from a low socio-economic status middle school of 200. Mr. Moses is the only African American participant and he is not a parent. He currently teaches 7th grade math and he has taught about a dozen years. Mr. Moses was a breath of fresh air. He was not only open and honest, he was very genuine in his approach to answering my question. He was actually struggling with returning to the work world of engineering even though he still loved teaching, he needed more financial resources. His heart was clearly in the lives of the children that he encounters daily. We

shared a simple dinner yet we ended up talking for a long time about some personal concerns after his interview. It is highly unusual for someone who has an engineering degree to sacrifice the potential income to be a teacher.

Participant #17. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mr. Call. Mr. Call is a core teacher from a low socio-economic status middle school of 200. He is Caucasian and he is not a parent. Mr. Call teaches 10th grade language arts and he has taught nearly twenty years. This was his first year teaching high school; prior to this new move, Mr. Call has always taught middle school language arts. His exit from middle school was political and he needed a change from the repeated turn over in administration in the past few years in the middle school. Mr. Call shared how all of this turmoil affected his work as a brand new high school teacher. Mr. Call is openly gay and was able to use that perspective from his life to give me some unique points of views about working with parents that no other participant did. Finally, he was one of the two participants that discussed the importance of social justice in working with parents and students in depth.

Participant #18. For the purpose of this study, this teacher is referred to as Mr. Stanley. Mr. Stanley is a core teacher from a low socio-economic status middle school of 200. He is Caucasian and he is not a parent. He teaches 7th grade social studies and this is only his third year of teaching. Mr. Stanley was an impressive young teacher and one of the three youngest participants. Although he did not come from a family of educators, one of his parents does work in a school and has regular parental contact. His wife is also a teacher. I could tell by just talking with him that much of his giftedness in working with people came from a solid upbringing from his home. He really left an

impression with me because of his balance in common sense, work ethics and a deep devotion to teaching.

Participants in focus group interviews

The focus group interview sample consisted of middle school student teachers who recently worked in or completed their student teaching assignments. In order for these student teachers to be able to have some commonality in their conversation, they had to have some shared experiences. This was the reason for splitting all of the participating student teachers into three groups based on the SES school of their student teaching assignments. Otherwise, their experiences would be vastly different. Among the participants, seven student taught at high SES (socio-economic status) public schools, none of them taught at middle SES public schools and two of them taught low SES public schools. After numerous attempts, I was not able to gather a group of middle SES public school student teachers for a focus group interview. The lack of a middle SES focus group will be discussed in chapter five as a weakness of this study. It is important to note that for the purpose of confidentiality, the participants of both focus groups were given pseudonyms, and will be referred to by the pseudonyms throughout the chapter.

Introduction of participants in High SES student teacher group

This group was an absolute delightful. We gathered at a local restaurant and enjoyed a meal together while we shared our respective input to the research study topic. Each of them brought their own brand of fervor towards the need to change how teachers are trained to work with parents. Since some of the participants knew each other, the conversation got started quickly; the interaction was smooth and at times comical, which

gave the whole interview a light-hearted yet professional disposition. In this case, some of the participants already knew each other, which was a definite plus. The designated note taker was present the entire time, who had made alphabet labels for each participant and he recorded the first few words each time a participant spoke and that made the transcription much smoother. The strength of this group came not only from the level of enthusiasm but also from their own university experiences. The other strength was the fact that three out of seven were parents of children who varied in age groups. The only weakness of this group was the fact that all of them student taught at the same high SES middle school but during different semesters, at different grade levels and in different subjects. This group had so much to contribute that it would be a joy to be together again just to talk about education in general. (See table 2)

Table 2: Demographics of student teachers of <u>high</u> SES middle schools in the focus group interviews:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gender	F	F	F	F	F	F	M
Ethnicity	W	W	W	W	W	W	W
Grade taught	7	6	6	6	6-8	6-8	8
Subject	L	M	M/LA/S/SS	M/S	VM	F/SP	SS
Age group	21-30	41-50	21-30	21-30	21-30	21-30	21-30
Education level	B	M	M	B	M	B	M
Certification	5-12 L K-12 F	5-9 M	K-6, 5-9 M/S	5-9 M/S	K-12 VM	K-12 F/SP	K-6, 5-12 SS
SES school Category	H	H	H	H	H	H	H
School size	401-600	401-600	401-600	401-600	401-600	401-600	401-600
Are you a parent?	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	Y
Personal SES background	L	H	M	M	M	M	M

Gender: F=female, M=male, Ethnicity: W= Caucasian, B = Black, A= Asian, O=Others
Subjects taught: M=Math, LA= Language arts, S= Science, SS = Social studies, F= French,
Education level: B= Bachelors, M = Masters, D = Doctorate
Certification: E= Elementary, MS = Middle school, HS=High school, G= Gifted
SES (socio-economic status) levels: H= high, M= middle, L= low, Parent? Y= yes, N=no

Participant #1. For the purpose of this study, this student teacher is referred to as Ms. Chelsea. Ms Chelsea is a 7th grade literacy student teacher in a middle school of 600. She is Caucasian and she is a parent of a pre-schooler. She is one of only three student teachers in the group who are parents. Ms. Chelsea had a delightful demeanor and a bright smile. Though she was not particularly assertive, she did participate well in the group discussion.

Participant #2. For the purpose of this study, this student teacher is referred to as Ms. Jill. Ms. Jill is a 6th grade math student teacher in a middle school of 600. She is Caucasian and she is a parent of one college age child and one high school age child. She was the most enthusiastic participant in the group. Ms. Jill was also the oldest (by age) student teacher in the group and the only one that has had children go through the K-12 school system already. Due to that reason, Ms. Jill had a lot of personal experiences that added a completely different perspective and richness to the discussion. She has finished her student teaching and is currently a math intern.

Participant #3. For the purpose of this study, this student teacher is referred to as Ms. Florence. Ms. Florence is a 6th grade all core subject student teacher in a middle school of 600. She is Caucasian and she is not a parent. She recently graduated with her masters' degree (this is a unique program at her university). Ms. Florence was one of the

most grounded and open-minded young teachers that I have ever met. She exuded an amazing amount of positive energy. She was eager to participate in the group and because she was in a university that had a unique program. Ms. Florence was also the only one of the participants that had an actual class that was focused on working with parents. Ms. Florence was also the only one who had to complete a full year of student teaching in all four core subject areas.

Participant #4. For the purpose of this study, this student teacher will be referred to as Ms. Mary. Ms. Mary is a 6th grade math and science student teacher in a middle school of 600. She is Caucasian and she is not a parent. Ms. Mary came to this group with a unique background of having a father who was a professional baseball player. She was also the only other participant that had to student teach in more than one subject. The other unique experience that Ms. Mary had was the fact that her cooperating teacher was diagnosed with a life threatening illness during her student teaching assignment and she ended up learning much of her skills from other teachers in that grade level or subject matter.

Participant #5. For the purpose of this study, this student teacher is referred to as Ms. Calista. Ms. Calista is a 6-8th grade vocal music student teacher in a middle school of 600. She is Caucasian and she is not a parent. Ms. Calista also had a unique experience of student teaching in the same school that eventually hired her to be the music department intern as soon as she finished her student assignment. Ms. Calista recently found out that she is also hired to take over her cooperating teacher's vocal music job because he is retiring. She was one of the two participants in the group who

student taught in an elective subject and therefore, had to learn to handle 6th-8th grade issues all at once. Ms. Calista also took the lead on student council in the same school.

Participant #6. For the purpose of this study, this student teacher is referred to as Ms. Angie. Ms. Angie is a 6-8th grade foreign language student teacher in a middle school of 600. She is Caucasian and she is not a parent. She is the second participant that got to learn how to teach and manage all three-grade levels. Ms. Angie was the quietest one in the group. She did not speak as much as the others but she had a lot of good questions to ask. I did not get to know her very well because she was a bit shy and I did not want to make her uncomfortable.

Participant #7. For the purpose of this study, this student teacher is referred to as Mr. Charles. Mr. Charles is a 8th grade social studies student teacher in a middle school of 600. He is Caucasian and he is a parent of two pre-school/kindergarten age children. He was also the only male in this focus group. Mr. Charles was and is an elementary intern, both before and after his student teaching assignment so he has some perspective about the connection between middle and elementary school. He was neither assertive nor quiet but nonetheless participated well.

Introduction of participants in Low SES student teacher group

Although this group also took some extraordinary effort to track down and it only consisted of two participants, they were both very enthusiastic to talk and eager to share their perspective on working with parents. Being student teachers, they both had a lot of questions. At first, they were hesitant to share out loud some of their negative experiences but after some re-assurance, they both had plenty to share during the interview. We met at a local café for afternoon tea. The same designated note taker from

the previous focus group interview was present the entire time. He did not need to make alphabet labels for the participants with only two but he followed the same note taking procedure as the previous focus group. Both of these delightful young teachers were very mature in their approach and mind-set. They asked if they could stay in touch so they can ask questions and continue to learn. It is encouraging to be around such young, budding passion for the teaching profession. (See table 3)

Table 3: Demographics of student teachers of <u>low</u> SES middle schools in the focus group interviews:

	1	**2**
Gender	F	F
Ethnicity	W	W
Grade taught	7	8
Subject	M	L
Age	21-30	21-30
Education level	B	M
Certification	5-9 M	5-9 L
SES school Category	L	L
School size	201-400	201-400
Are you a parent?	N	N
Personal SES background	M	M

Gender: F=female, M=male
Ethnicity: W= Caucasian, B = Black, A= Asian, L= Latino, O=Others
Subjects taught: M=Math, LA= Language arts, S= Science, SS = Social studies, PE= Physical education, VM= Vocal Music, H= health, EC = Economics, CH=Chemistry, B= Biology, LB= Library, W= Writing, EL= English language learner. R= Reading, F= French, SP= Spanish
Education level: B= Bachelors, M = Masters, D = Doctorate
Certification: E= Elementary, MS = Middle school, HS=High school, AD= administration, G= Gifted
SES (socio-economic status) levels: H= high, M= middle, L= low
Parent? Y= yes, N=no

Participant #1. For the purpose of this study, this student teacher is referred to as Ms. Nancy. Ms. Nancy is a 7th grade math student teacher in a middle school of 300. She is Caucasian and she is not a parent. She was very eager to learn whatever she can and was most interested in learning how to figure out when to use which communication tool with parents. The spirit of her sharing (out of all of the focus group participants) during the interview demonstrated the essence of the fears, anxieties, stress and the lack of knowledge among nearly every student teacher.   However, Ms. Nancy had a very kind, energetic yet well-mannered and genuine demeanor.

Participant #2. For the purpose of this study, this student teacher is referred to as Ms. Regina. Ms. Regina is an 8th grade literacy student teacher in a middle school of 300. She is Caucasian and she is not a parent. Ms. Regina did not follow the route of the normal, everyday student teaching. She had the gift and unique experience of growing up in a middle SES school system but she worked as a writing intern in high SES middle school and now, she is student teaching in a low SES middle school. She stated that it has been a long road of learning yet she was appreciative of how well prepared she was to take any given teaching job ahead of her. Her demeanor was calm and collected and she contributed richly to the interview.

Categories

In an inductive grounded theory study, it is appropriate to analyze the interview transcripts without preconceived notions. This approach allowed for categories to naturally emerge from the data and those categories can then be organized to form a theory. According to Creswell (1998, p.151), each category is made up of properties that

represent various perspectives within the category.   Each property has dimensions that
give a range of continuum within the property. In the review of the transcripts, eight
major categories were identified as the key to answering the research question. Some of
these categories provided solid suggestions in forming a possible future class or
workshop to better teach and prepare middle school teachers, if not all teachers, to be
more equipped to work with parents. The major categories are listed on table 4. A full
list of sub-categories, properties and dimensions is outlined in Appendix K. Within the
sub-categories, each property was listed followed by the dimensions of each property.
All of these categories are related to the concept of teachers working with parents. For
example, category one referred to the amount of training teachers received in learning
how to work with parents while category four referred to methods of communication with
parents.

Table 4: Categories

1	Amount of training
2	Methods of learning
3	Personal experiences
4	Communication tools
5	Approaches to communication
6	Teacher's belief
7	Supports for teachers
8	Suggestions

During the review of the transcripts, these categories emerged throughout the various interviews. This researcher was able to recognize these eight major categories from nearly all of the interviews. These categories were confirmed as this researcher reviewed all of the transcripts several times during the analysis. Initially, this researcher read the transcript as she transcribed the recordings. It was immensely helpful to complete the transcription rather than retaining a transcriptionist because listening and typing really helped to retain the data in this researcher's thought process. Once the transcript was printed, this researcher circled and underlined concepts and ideas of high interest and/or frequency with a pencil only as to avoid mistakenly categorizing by using color markers during this early stage of analysis. The purpose of this step is to locate data that was building saturation without categorizing them immediately. After the saturation was identified, this researcher used selected colors to highlight the penciled sections of the dialogue and began to establish the categories as well as sub-categories.

Once the categories were initially established, this researcher re-read all of the transcripts again and she added some categories but she also eliminated some of the categories in which some of the transcription content belonged but also developed the properties from the subcategories. This researcher then developed several matrices to indicate the location of the relevant data and to begin to connect the various categories. Finally, the researcher gave dimensions to each property as to their strengths and weakness. Dialogues and quotes from the transcripts were added to support the discussion of each category and subcategories. Participants were referred to by their pseudonyms (as stated in the introduction of the participants) throughout the various

sections of the eight major categories in this chapter. The quotes were cited with participants' pseudonyms and line numbers.

Category 1: amount of training

All of the middle school teachers who participated in the semi-structured interviews are currently teaching full time in a public middle school with the exception of one teacher who just changed over to high school for this school year. All but one of them spoke either directly or indirectly about their lack of training and knowledge as well as fear and anxiety to work with parents from their respective universities as undergraduate students. Moreover, the lack of training for in-service teachers such as seminars or professional development programs was also evident during the interviews. Therefore, within this first category, there were two sub-categories: The lack of university training for pre-service teachers and the lack of training for in-service teachers and how the absence of training contributed to their fear and anxiety.

The lack of university training for pre-service teachers

This study yielded 94.4% (17/18) of the teachers did not cite any specific training from the universities. This finding was not surprising because most of the participants were seasoned teachers and at the time of their undergraduate training, the need to be trained for working with parents was not nearly as apparent as it is today. Chavkin & Williams (1989) reported that at the time only 4-15% of the universities had any training for teachers to learn to work with parents while in a more recent study by Epstein (2005), she claimed that in 37 states and 500 universities, 60% of the universities had classes on parental involvement. This is the highest number reported thus far in any research study

regarding teacher training in the area of working with parents as other studies do not report such a high percentage. The only teacher who actually had a class in his university on working with parents was also one of the youngest participating teachers in the study. This is encouraging as there is some indication that changes in training were on the horizon with the pre-service teachers. Since the lack of training was one of the ten factors from the initial round of literature review, this confirmed that the need for teachers to be trained to work with parents continues to exist even if the situation was slowly improving. All of the participating teachers felt unprepared to work with parents when they first entered the teaching profession. On the other hand, among student teachers, eight out of nine (88.9%) did not receive any formal university training either. It is, however, a slightly improved percentage from the teacher group.

Absolutely no training. Teachers often looked for or at least felt a need for knowledge and for training to figure out how to work with parents. Yet among the participants, more than two thirds of the teachers received absolutely no training in the university setting to work with parents in any school and specifically, none in middle school. This was not by choice, rather, there was simply no offerings of such classes at the university.

> I do not remember having any specific training as an undergrad to interact with parents. (Mrs. Paul, lines 8-9)

> I know in college while I was there, there were no classes. (Mrs. Long, line 7)

I do not remember once from undergrad being talk to about working with parents once, not once! I did not get my masters in education so that would not have come up. I did not even have any real conversation about working with parents until I came to the school that I am at now. (Mr. Call, lines 8-9)

Having absolutely no training is a reality for almost every pre-service teacher; however, a few teachers are fortunate enough to have bits and pieces of learning in university classes that gave them a beginning knowledge in the area of working with parents.

Bits and pieces of knowledge. Among the participants, about one quarter of the teachers and student teachers received bits and pieces of discussion or focus in the university setting from professors in related classes such as a communications class or special education course to work with parents, but that was a chance encounter rather than either a formal requirement or an elective from the university.

In student teaching though, I did participate in parent/teacher conferences in one of my student teaching assignments. That is probably the closest thing I can think of . (Mrs. Darcy, lines 9-10)

The two things that come to mind are making sure that you notify them (parents) early, I mean to call him, let them know, email them (…..) and the second thing is to start with good news. One of my professors that I had last semester before student teaching and it was probably teaching and learning reading in secondary school. (Ms. Calista, HSES, lines 23-30)

I had a math methods class and we talked about communicating with parents. This is during my practicum so it was late in the game. She taught us how to write introductory letters, she is actually my supervisor now so that has been helpful. She really ingrained in our heads that your first contact should be positive. Even if it is just calling at the beginning of school to introduce yourself or just sending an email, it should be positive. (Ms. Nancy, LSES, lines 79-84)

From the sample quotes, it appeared that, among the professors of the current generation of new teachers, there was a greater mention of the importance of working with parents. This is an improvement from absolutely no training from undergraduate course work. The need for formal course work to provide teachers with training to work with parents remain.

Established formal course work. Among the participants, only one of the teachers and one of the student teachers received established formal course work in the university setting to work with parents in middle school. This model of training continues to be rare, but the need to train teachers to work with parents is slowly gaining some ground. Nevertheless, there is much to be studied and changed in order for this to become a purposeful and systematic process.

I absolutely loved the education I got because I was in the program at XXXXXX and couple of teachers did a really nice job in engaging us in conversation about how to deal with difficult situations with parents and also a lot of the pitfalls that teachers can run into. (Mr. Simon, lines 47-50)

I felt like that and the class I keep coming back to had not only learning about communication with parents, but it was one of the most practical classes that I had. I learned a lot not only with dealing with parents but also with their families, with the students, everything (…..) how to be proactive with parents because they know their student better than anyone else. That class had a good professor, we had interaction with teachers and we had a lot of practical experiences including parents coming in to talk to us. I would keep all of that but I think it should be a required class and not an elective. (Ms. Florence, HSES, lines 329-336)

The lack of training for pre-service has been a serious issue in the university system but compounding the problem was the fact that teacher training for working with parents continues into the school systems where in-service teachers also received no training either.

Lack of training for in-service teachers

In general, teachers all came into the profession with little or no training to work with parents. While each of them struggled to find ways to learn how to work with parents, school districts lack focus and resources to provide training for teachers on the job. Namely, there is virtually no training program, seminars, workshops or professional development (P.D.) in any format for the purpose of helping teachers learn how to work with parents and research studies support that fact (Jones, 2001, Moore, Johnson & Kardos, 2002, Moir, 2009). Similarly, participating teachers did not report receiving any PD that was strictly for the purpose of supporting their work with parents.

Not from a PD, no (…..) I would say I went to a counselor and I had both of his

daughters and we use to have really good conversations about this and I

encouraged him to put all of his advice and write a book. (Mrs. Paul, lines 94-96)

I would not say PD that is specifically geared for working with parents but more

PD that helped me understands the background of my students. (Mr. Call, lines

11-12).

Fears and anxiety. Fears and anxiety are a natural part of entering a new career

and teaching is no exception to that unwritten rule, especially, teachers are apprehensive

about working with parents partly because the typical beginning teacher is in his/her early

20's and also not a parent. Without any training, before or during teaching, to work with

parents; the level of fears and anxiety in teachers only elevates.

The majority of the participating teachers and student teachers shared that they

had fears and anxiety about working with parents that caused them to not take any

initiative to approach parents, to open dialogues, to build a working relationship or to

even simply start. It is natural for beginning teachers to have fear and anxiety about

working with parents. After all, the typical starting teacher profile is a 22-year-old non-

parent and because of that, most teachers have no idea what to do or how to work with

parents, hence, the emotional reactions to this vital part of the job.

I think I started off as a very apprehensive teacher about it. I was apprehensive

about calling a parents and telling them that their child has done something

wrong. I was fearing the retribution that I would get back from them (…..). You

know, how my child never does anything wrong and all of that? I remember that first couple of years, I did not make a lot of calls because I was scared to. (Mr. Smith, lines 10-14)

Most undergraduates are very, very young and so they do not have a lot of experience working with parents and it was a little threatening or at least I felt that way being 21 years old and I felt inferior. I do not know, I just did not feel that confident. (Mrs. Coat, lines 6-9)

I would say that that student teaching was a wake up call because that was the first time I interacted with a parent, before that, I have never spoken to a parent. My only experience before student teaching was in my observations where I watched a parent yell at us (the teacher that I was observing and myself) and it was, "Oh, so that is what is going to happen to me with parents?" (Ms. Chelsea, HSES, lines 146-150)

The apprehension of every beginning teacher was evident. The sample quotes noted that trepidation from a married teacher with no children, a mother of two teenagers and a young and single student teacher. No matter how one anticipated the mandatory responsibility of working with parents, there was always some degree of fear and anxiety. The lack of knowledge and training for almost every teacher only added to the uneasiness.

The lack of training and the need for training in the university undergraduate program has been well documented in this study by nearly each participant. Between feeling anxious and unprepared, new teachers frequently did not begin the process of working with parents. More often than not, teachers began to learn to work with parents out of necessity for the job and usually with little or no knowledge. Even after years of working with parents, teachers continued to feel anxious but from practice and experiences, they felt a bit more confident. Like any other skill, acquisition begins with learning from some avenue that provides knowledge and support. As these teachers learned on the job, they also shared the methods in which they acquired their skills and knowledge in the area of working with parents.

Category 2: methods of learning

Since there was virtually no formal training in the university nor was there any professional development or seminars for teachers in the area of working with parents, individual teachers were left to find various ways to learn how to work with parents on their own. The majority of teachers in this study described the following as their methods of learning: mentoring, observations and trial and error. However, there was not a specific reason as to why any particular teacher chose to learn from a particular method. The inference is since there was no formal system of learning, each teacher learned how to work with parents from any source they had available to them and often, more than one source in hopes of gaining as much knowledge and insight as possible.

Mentoring

Teachers seemed to have learned firsthand knowledge extensively from being mentored by other teaching professionals. Occasionally, a teacher was fortunate enough to have a mentor teacher who took the time to teach him/her the art and skill specifically in the area of working with parents. Teachers who did have one-on-one mentoring benefitted greatly from advice, discussions, example of emails, newsletter and phone calls. One aspect of mentoring that provided more depth in learning is the fact that mentoring was the most personal of the three main learning methods whereby the mentor and mentee, through mentoring, built a relationship with each other.

Administrators. Administrators have a charge to be the instructional leader in the school and also mentor and assist teachers to grow in their knowledge and practice of other responsibilities in teaching. One of the most important responsibilities is to work with parents. Administrators also have the authority to give directives for resources as well as to protect new teachers from non-cooperative parents. Many teachers, in particular the beginning teachers, struggled in this area. Mentorship and support were both highly important in the success of teachers working effectively with parents (Flynn & Nolan, 2008).

I have a very unique situation because I actually attended our district's high school as a kid and our assistant principal at the time also did as well. One of the thing he (the administrator) did was he took me aside and said to me, "You come from the same place that these kids did, you know some of these kids parents because you went to high school with them so there is no reason why you should

be worried about it (contacting parents) because if anything, say that you are a XXXXXXX grad also" and once these kids' parent connect that we went to high school together it was really easy. (Mr. Smith, lines 43-49)

I had several mentors actually, I have been teaching 17 years and my first administrator was just phenomenal! And he was my principal when I went to high school and later on I graduated and taught under him. It was a long standing relationship and he was quick to saying little things to me because that was also the time that I was dealing with the booster club and the gentleman who left the job that I took did not have kids but was very strong and dedicated and put in amazing hours and my administrator would pull me in and say, "Here is what I think, here is the way I would deal with the situation and he kind of talked me through a lot of that. The gentleman who left that position became the coordinator for the district so he was kind of my boss and also was spectacular with dealing with parents so whenever I felt harassed dealing with a parent, both of these gentlemen made me feel like I can just go to them and they gave me great advice and guidance. (Mrs. Coats, lines 80-91)

Administrators take the lead in the direction of the school. In order for serious improvement in the working relationship between teachers and parents, mentoring and working with teachers on this topic must take priority and that is up to the administrators. One of the long- term effects will be eventually having teachers who can take part in the mentoring of newer teachers. Aside from administrators, the other group of mentors was teachers.

Teachers. Since most middle school teachers are placed on teams either by grade level (usually core subject teachers) or by subject specific courses (usually elective teachers), they learned from or at least relied on each other for knowledge, for skills and for mutual support. This was one of the greatest advantages for beginning middle school teachers as neither elementary nor high school teachers are assigned to be on teams. Often, the beginning teachers relied on their collegial relationship with the more seasoned colleagues for their valued knowledge and experience especially in the area of working with parents.

> I see that my colleague is extremely talented and diplomatically talking to parents. He is incredibly politically correct in all of his emails and he is also incredibly good at writing an email that does not seem to convey any type of emotions, which I have always been very envious of his ability to do that. (Mr. Simon, lines 135-138)

> Being in the middle school setting, we are involved in a lot of team conferences and so even before I had my first parent/teacher conference, I sat through meetings where my team called in parents of kids that we already had concerns about and I watched the interactions of my colleagues who have done this for a long time, much longer than I have and I think that helped a lot. (Mrs. Long, lines 11-15).

I felt very comfortable talking professionally, even as a young teacher. They (team colleagues) explained the importance of talking with parents and your role as a teacher and how you should be as a teacher and being comfortable in your role even though you are young and the parents were older than you were, and you are closer to their kids' age than them and vice-versa. You have a role and it is an important role so I learned a lot from colleagues". (Mr. Peterson, lines 38-43)

In this study, some administrators met with teachers regularly, some just occasionally and others, none at all. The depth of learning for the teachers was more general guidelines/advice and administrative support. On the other hand, fellow teachers such as team teachers and common subject teachers, met with the participating teachers frequently. These mentoring teachers provided learning that was more practical, timely, intimate and some suggestions were even particularly recommended for specific student or parental needs. The success of these teachers with parents was evident, however, the degree of success was not entirely clear for two reasons. One, the degree of success from mentoring was not purposefully measured in this study. Two, the success of these teachers was not solely from mentoring.

It is a gift when teachers found mentoring from administrators and various fellow teachers. Unfortunately, it was not a method on which beginning teachers can rely on. Most of them are left to learn from either their pursuit for knowledge or their own random experiences, one of those experiences is observation.

Observations

   Administrators and teachers. Teachers also utilized their ability to observe and learn from their colleagues. Sometimes the learning came from observing an administrator, and other times it came from observing a fellow teacher. These participants discussed learning what to do as well as what not to do from what they observed in their respective schools.

> He (the administrator) told a lot of stories about himself and how he made home visits right away because he wanted the community to get to know these families so he went to visit these homes when there was a problem or he would see them here and there and outside of school so when there was a problem, he would take care of it just like that. Actually a face to face instead of a phone call and he really pushed that with everybody to make a face to face contact as soon as possible so whenever you see a parent, use that as an opportunity. (Mr. Smith, lines 52-59)

> Yeah, I think I have learned from all of my teammates and I was fortunate to come in and slide into a team with two very experienced teachers and two newer teachers and we can get some background or information and some community knowledge that some teachers here already knew such as expectations and suggestions for heading off problems, ways to deal with issues as they came up, so definitely peers. (Mr. Matthews, lines 65-69)

I feel like I have learned more of what I would not do than what I would do from my cooperating teacher, unfortunately. I do not know if you wanted to know that but I would have done it differently. Sometimes you learn more from a negative than a positive. She never asks or notices what parent a is saying to her or giving her input, it is more like this is what has happened and I wanted to let you know. (Ms. Nancy, LSES, lines 62-66).

In this study, participating teachers and student teachers discussed observation of both administrators and teachers. The specific frequency of those observations was not discussed. The depth of learning from these observations was not clear. Most participants only discussed learning some specific skills and in particular, what to do and what not to do. The success of these teachers with parents was again evident, however, the degree of success was not entirely clear for the same two reasons. One, the degree of success from observations was not purposefully measured in this study. Two, the success of these teachers was not solely from observations.

Teachers began their teaching career without any formal university training in working with parents. In addition, it is important to note that no participant mentioned any specific written materials such as books, scholarly research papers or even an article on the topic of working with parents. Some teachers did not have any direct mentoring and they might have only had some observations. Unfortunately, they were left with learning by trial and error.

Trial and error

This method of learning that was mentioned by nearly each participant either directly or at least in directly implied during the interviews. The significance of trial and error was the direct result of having no training and knowledge prior to entering the teaching profession. Although the participants seemed to imply that mentors were the most helpful, it does not mean having a mentor is automatic for every new teacher. The trial and error approach also showed the lack of options teachers have to learn to work with parents, especially if a teacher is not blessed with a mentor at his/her new teaching position.

Trial and error and seeing what approach works with which type of situation or people. (Mr. Ballwin, lines 6-7)

I do not know, I just did not feel that confident but I started with a large program and we had a booster club and it was parent run. So I had to learn very quick how to work with the parents and make sure they did not take over the program because if it was a strong booster program, they have that potential. It was all trial and error. (Mrs. Coats, lines 18-22)

When I am talking about this, I mean self-taught. I learned all of this by myself. (Mrs. Rhodes, line 75)

In this study, trial and error suggest that teachers learned from experiences on the job and on their own. The frequency of this strategy was implied to be regularly because

nearly all teachers had to apply this method of learning for themselves. However, the significance of the learning was not clear. It was assumed to be somewhat significant rather than none because if nearly every teacher was using trial and error, they must have learned something by trying different methods of interaction with parents. Again, the success of these teachers with parents was evident, however, the degree of success was not entirely clear for the same two reasons. One, the degree of success from trial and error was not purposefully measured in this study. Two, in the success of these teachers, for some, it was solely from trial and error and for others, it was not.

Even with a mentor, most schools did not have mentors who are paid and assigned to new teachers for the sole purpose of mentorship towards a beginner. Teachers gained some learning from observations also but trial and error seemed to be what every teacher started their teaching careers with. To be fair, trial and error is a part of learning for any new job. Having said that, trial and error with no guidance or knowledge is also not sufficient.

Although these teachers do eventually master the art of working with parents, they were at the mercy of chance encounters with a mentor in each of their schools. Since many teachers reported that they struggled with their working relationships with parents, clearly, this trial and error type system or the chanced encounter of a mentor was not reliable, functional or systematic enough for the existing needs. What was clear is the need to develop a dependable and organized way to train teachers to work with parents. Another resource that teachers tended to draw from was their own personal experiences.

Category 3: personal experiences

Teaching academic subjects involves balancing solid content knowledge, age appropriate pedagogy and relationships with students. Likewise, working with parents requires a balance of communication skills, knowledge of methodology and appropriate interaction with parents. Since working with parents is a highly personal aspect of teaching, the art and skill of collaborating with parents to support students' learning is at least partly related to personal experiences.   On the other hand, with little to no knowledge, teachers drew from personal experiences to support their work with parents. Within this category, the following sub-categories exist: being a parent, having experiences in other jobs, childhood experiences and circumstances of family or friends.

Being a parent

In this study, ten of the 17 participating teachers and three of nine student teachers were parents and shared that being a parent does have an impact on how teachers view and approach the parents of their students, although the depth of the impact was not measured in this study. On the other hand, seven of 17 participating teachers (six of 9 student teachers) are not parents and yet who were successful in working with the parents. Therefore, the degree of impact from being a parent versus not being a parent in terms of building a working relationship with parents was unclear. Participating teachers shared their changes and growth in working with parents since becoming parents themselves. Four of the participating teachers who were parents had children who were early childhood or elementary school age. Another four of ten had children who were either currently in middle school and the remaining who have had children that have since become adults. This meant not only were they parents themselves, they were

parents who have also been or are currently parents of middle school age students. Within the participating student teachers that were parents, only one of nine had children who were college-age. Having been parents of at least middle school age seem to make some difference, again the degree of difference was also not clear.

Two additional factors also seemed to make a difference, although again the depth of the impact or difference was unclear. First, having raised children for at least years prior to becoming a teacher definitely created different experiences and dynamics to the late career changers who became teachers at the middle age stage. Two participating teachers and one student teacher were in that position. These participants were clear that the experience from being a parent prior to becoming a teacher taught them all about the needs and desires of parents. They stated that the understanding of those needs had the most impact in their learning and knowledge of working with parents. Second, participants who were parents of child(ren) with special needs also had a slightly different perspective in the area of working with parents as teachers themselves because the needs of the child(ren) were so different than the average middle school student. Rather than negatively impacting their point of view, the experience of having a special needs child as a parent seemed to have given these participating teachers yet another layer of experiences and perspectives to draw from as tools in a positive manner whenever they were in the teacher role.

> I just became a parent a couple of years ago and I always think to myself, how would I want to be informed about his behavior, his school experiences? You know, would I just want to be left in the dark? (Mr. Donaldson, lines 78-80)

I think even being a parent for a year and a half, there is no book and a lot of times there is no right or wrong, there are just decisions to make. It is a flexible thing, being a parent, and a perspective where I think a lot of times when parents look at a teacher as a guide and you got to be a guide for the parent. Like it is easier to share an issue. (Mr. Peterson, lines 151-155)

Becoming a parent is arguably one of most powerful life changing events. It is no surprise that being a parent would change how a teacher viewed and does his/her work with parents. At the very least, having been on the same path provided insights that no other experience could. One of the biggest impact seemed to be becoming a parent prior to becoming a teacher and learning from that experience firsthand and applying that knowledge to better meet the needs of the parents of the students.

Being a parent before becoming a teacher. Three participants (two teachers and one student teacher) all claimed that much of their effectiveness came from becoming a parent before becoming a teacher. They definitely stated that their parenting experiences were the most formative for their own learning. Nothing else has provided them with the same level of knowledge, understanding and to some degree, skills to reach parents as a teacher now.

Yeah, my understanding, my perspective of what is really important and what is not as important when you look at the development of a student and that perspective as a parent has been valuable to me (…..) I think the most formative thing is just the experience with my kids and their own schools. Seeing, seeing

what seem to work well and what did not seem to work as well, responsiveness versus lack of responsiveness, if that is the right way to say it so I think honestly that my own personal experience with my children's school. (Mr. Matthews, lines 103-106 & lines 134-136)

I offer a different perspective because I am a mom. I noticed that the younger teachers totally come from a different place and you can tell by listening to somebody when they cannot understand and they say, "I cannot understand why so and so would (…..)" but as a mom, I would immediately think, it could be this or it could be that. You start having ding, ding, ding, ding in your head it could be the parents are separated, the grandma just died (…..) so when I talk to parents, I understand the "mama bear" language. I was a mama bear and I understand that we are talking about your baby and we are talking about somebody that you love and nurture and a lot of teachers think you are talking about the curriculum. They are not even speaking the same language. Why this topic was important to me is because to a parent, it is absolutely critical. They are the other factor and they have to be on your side and you have to be on their side. The same side and same page to understand their point. The vocabulary and the syntax and the words that you use are so critical. You have to be able to identify the first minute that you are, you are looking out for their child. (Mrs. Paul, lines 49-63)

Okay, again as a parent, I would trust the opinion of a teacher with his or her own children then someone who does not have one. I only feel that way because I

know how I felt before I had children and I had one and realize that I felt so

differently and think so differently so there is some truth to this but that does not

mean that a teacher who is 22 cannot be great and really understanding. You do

not have to have kids to be effective but you would have to prove yourself to me

first.   You need to bridge the gap between you and the parent first by showing

that you do get my child but the thought of just having to have that conversation

with parent is paralyzing and I am so glad that I do not have to do that. (Ms. Jill,

lines 429-437)

Being a parent before becoming a teacher provided the type of learning that no

university classroom can possibly match. Another type of experience that cannot be

imitated is being a parent of a special needs child. No matter how much one has read

about or observed, one cannot gain the insights that only a parent with a special needs

child could.

Being a parent of special needs children. Similar to being a parent prior to being

a teacher, having been parents of special needs children offered perspectives that simply

cannot be gained anywhere else. In addition, studies showed that teachers of special

education students had more training than general education teachers (Flanigan, 2005)

and therefore, a general education teacher who is also a parent of a child with special

needs might have received better outreach and communication as a result.   Even teachers

who are clearly effective in working with parents will admit that having a special needs

child only increased the ability to understand the needs and the unique struggles of

parents who are in comparable circumstances.

Obviously she was my oldest and I have gone through this three times and they had great transitions three times. That experience has tremendously impacted my empathy for parents all three of my kids are different and two of my children are in the gifted program and one of my children was diagnosed with a learning disability in ADHD relatively late much to my dismay (…..) relatively late in her academic life so I have had pretty wide ranges of experiences with schools and all three of them have done fine but it has not always been easy so I think that it has shaped my approach with parents. Yeah, my understanding, my perspective of what is really important and what is not as important when you look at the development of a student and the perspective as a parent has been valuable to me. (Mr. Matthews, lines 90-101)

My second child has special needs so I have seen it from that side as well. From the kid who is advanced to the child who struggles and how to teach with this teachers and what that looks like so I know from my perspective what a parent would want. It is their child in my classroom. (Mrs. Coats, lines 41-50)

Being a parent of any child is a demanding and challenging job but having a child with special needs puts that experience into a class by itself. Similarly, living through parenting teenagers is another experience that parallels no other. In this study, participants seemed to have another point of understanding as middle school teachers.

Having been a teacher prior to becoming a teacher or having been a parent of a special needs child seemed to add to the depth of knowledge for teachers on their path of learning to work with parents. These two particular experiences also seemed to impact

teachers' work with parents significant. Aside from being a parent, the next major impact that stemmed from personal experiences came from having other jobs that were not directly related to teaching.

Other jobs

The majority of the participants had non-teaching related jobs prior to entering the teaching professions. Many of them stated that the experiences and learning from those non-teaching jobs contributed greatly in their work with building relationships with parents. Although those experiences did not directly teach them how to work with parents, they added to their abilities and skills in handling people on the job.

Customer service related jobs. Learning comes in all formats and one type of job that is not teaching-related where participants found the most significant learning was jobs in customer service because participants learned the skills needed to cope with things such as rejection, talking to strangers and talking to people who were irate. They also learned how to work through their own personal struggles, such as shyness, to provide suitable customer service. Corresponding to that, teachers apply these same skills to work through their struggles with parents for the purpose of providing them with support and service.

> I was also actually a very shy kid growing up. After I started getting into my high school years, I started opening up a little bit. I also started working in retail and once I started working at a baby store (…..) I worked in retail and I did not know a single thing about it and I started learning and I had to deal with customers constantly and right there, my stomach would just go into huge knots and now I

talk all the time, at least the kids tell me that. That experience was really impressionable and that helped form me into the person that I am today. (Mr. Smith, lines 109-115)

When I was in college, I had a job being a door-to-door fundraiser for a non-profit group and people got really mad at me for coming to their house and I think that one thing I developed because of that job was "thick skin" and you know if somebody yelled at me, I would just say, "hey, thank you for your time." And initially, I was very emotional about it but after a month or two, I learned to not be emotional about it because they are not mad at me, they were mad about (…..) me being there and there is probably something else going on. I think it would be awesome if you can give student teachers an opportunity where they are put in some environment where they are dealing with people who are just upset.
(Mr. Simon, lines 108-116)

I work at a bookstore and there are people who are not nice there. It is just books, it is not life and people get worked up over nothing (…..) Angry about a product, angry at me, that we have a recorder that answers the phone instead a human, all sorts of thing so you just learn to affirm what they are saying and dressing the point no matter how many times they want to vent. They are just irritated so I have noticed at Barnes and Nobles. At school, what do angry parents look like? It is hard to keep your ground to not lose track of what you are talking about but still be able to say, "I see how you are feeling. What can we do to fix it?" It is hard

for me to stay on track. So if there was some kind of role-play where the person is

pretending to be continuously upset of this, I can practice what to do with them.

Something else I thought of, what to do with the apathetic ones. They do not care

and you got to get them to care. (Ms. Regina, LESE, lines 172-183)

Job skills come from all kinds of places and venues. No teacher has claimed that

their skills as a teacher only came from universities, rather, each participant cited that

their skill sets came from all types of experiences. Some even came from working with

children but not necessarily from the traditional classroom setting.

Other jobs that work with children. Some of the participants found learning from

jobs that worked with children. These jobs seemed to have taught these participants

skills to relate to parents in another setting. These types of jobs include childcare and

other child-related recreational jobs.

I would say it is a couple of things. One, as a child, I was often a baby sitter for

younger children. I grew up in a church and lots of people ask me to baby sit

because I always seem to have control over the kids that I baby sat, even the most

misbehaved child. Some of the kids who the church could not doing anything

with and the parents could not do anything with and I could always get them to do

what I asked so people would often hire me to baby sit their children. (Mr.

Moses, lines 97-102)

I can tell you that I started at age 14 working at a swimming pool teaching swimming lessons and being a life guard so I had a lot of practice with safety and organization with kids because you had to be in charge. (Mrs. Rhodes, lines 116-118)

I was a baby sitter and I just loved being and working with kids. (Mrs. Benson, lines 77-78)

These participants began working with children in a non-classroom setting during their teenage years, which gave them a head start in both their interaction with kids as well as with their parents. Surprisingly, the customer service related jobs seemed to have given a greater impact to teachers learning how to work with parents than even jobs that are child-related. The inference is people who have chosen teaching as a career tended to be child-centered already but they needed to learn how to handle adults who were not always content, cooperative or reasonable. In addition to other jobs, childhood experiences also played a role in how personal experiences impacted their work with parents.

Childhood experiences

Some of the participants shared their experiences as students when they were younger as well as how they were raised by their families. Those experiences seemed to impact how they view their work with parents and how their own upbringing impacted their interactions such as demeanors and approaches with parents.

When I was a sophomore or junior in high school, I had three cousins from the city. Three boys, they had to be 8th, 5th and 3rd grade and they came to live with us, our family, me and my sister. All of a sudden, we had three elementary-age kids that my parents did not even birth to come live with us. I would always end up being the mediator or the translator, sort to speak, because they did not always know how to communicate with my parents. And, and (…..) I do not know, it just kind of became a part of me after many years of this. You just had to develop those skills in order to make it work. That was something that really affected me because I really had to learn how to communicate between my parents and my cousins and their expectations. (Mr. Moses, lines 104-112)

Just from how I was raised and I was raised by good people where they taught me that I do not want to sound like I am ignorant or (…..) You want to sound like you are professional and this is something that you take care of because it is your job. You want to be approachable and parents feel safe with you and if they wanted to tell you something, they would pick up the phone. The last thing you want is a hurtful and awkward conversation or one sided where it feels like you are questioning the parents. I was raised in a yes ma'am and yes sir kind of household and so how you address an adult was really emphasized and that was really set in stone. Even at the age of four and five, my parents expected me to shake hands when I addressed people and look them in the eye and building my character up in this way. As teachers, we are teaching more than just content, we are teaching kids how to be better people. In high school, I went to a private high school near

the science center and their model is "meant for others" and everything that is
instilled in there is all about you becoming a better individual and in society and
no matter what it is, going out of your way to help others is the way to go. (Mr.
Stanley, lines 29-51)

Childhood experiences are often the first experiences in daily human interaction.
Participants learned from those valuable lessons and applied them in their work with
parents. However, neither the impact nor the degree of learning from of those
experiences was clear. Personal experiences were not merely built by childhood
memories alone, they also came from sharing experiences with friends and family.
Participants who had some unique circumstances that challenged their thinking and
viewpoints noted that those experiences had some impact on their work with parents.

Friends and family circumstances

Another factor that impacted teachers' learning to work with parents seemed to be
their own personal friends and family circumstances. Many of those circumstances
included having family members who had children with special needs and also having
had parents who were teachers themselves. Growing up with parents who were teachers
allowed some, but not all, of the participants to already have some pre-conceived notions
about working with parents as teachers. Being relatives of children with special needs
only heightened the awareness and understanding of the participating teachers.

I know my nephew is in 6th grade and he is on an IEP and he has a lot of different
social issues and I think that, if my sister would advocate for his needs more and
would contact his teachers more, he would have a lot more resources for his needs

and he would be doing a lot better in school than he is. So, I am not sure how much his teachers contact my sister but when he goes to high school and does not get to communicate as much with those teachers and it is not like elementary where you have only one teacher seeing him all day and so… I think I would reach out to parents because you do not know if they are going to reach out to you. Maybe it is a different kind of situation, maybe a parent is thinking, " I have never contacted a teacher before." ,so I think I would need to contact that parent. (Mrs. Green, lines 53-62)

Personal experiences often are the foundation of how people relate to one another. The working relationship between parents and teachers is no exception to this unwritten rule. In this study, there was a clear indication that personal experiences definitely affected how teachers approach working with parents. Having been parents prior to teaching or working customer service related jobs seemed to have made the largest difference. However, exactly how those experiences relate or the depth of their effects was not definitive in this study.

Category 4: communication tools

As teachers began to develop a set of skills to work with parents, the various communication tools were on top of the "to learn" list of skills that were required to work effectively with parents. Teachers who were effective in working with parents tended to apply a balance of mixed communication tools such as email, phone call, face to face conversations, and technology support such as teacher websites and online grade programs. The difference seemed to be the appropriate mixture of tools, depending on

the needs and demands of the specific school culture and community. Effective teachers also tended to be able to discern, select and utilize a specific tool for a specific purpose as well as balancing those tools with timing and frequency of contact. For example, reports of bullying to parents tended to require a phone call rather than an email whereas simply reporting missing assignments was totally appropriate with a short email. The combination of mixed use of communication tools and timing seemed to be the factor that made these teachers effective. The exact wording, specific content and length of communication were not purposely studied. Within this category, the subcategories included: Phone calls, emails, website/internet/technology, face-to-face meetings, other tools and the preferred tools of teachers.

Phone calls

In the application of phone calls as a communication tool, teachers tended to find effectiveness in communicating information of a more serious nature or something that required a lengthy two-sided conversation and issues that were more of the delicate nature. The advantages of phone calls included inflection of voice, the tone quality of the conversation, ability for immediate interaction between two people and the convenience of not having to have a face-to-face meeting which would have required more time. The disadvantages of phone calls included the difficulties of terminating a conversation, the escalation of emotions, the additional time required versus emails and, at times, the difficulty of reaching someone.

> I keep reminding teachers, pick up the phone and do not rely too heavily on emails. Emails are great but when there is a situation that is not too great. But just

as I say that, the power of talking with someone is so much greater than an impersonal email that is being sent. (Dr. Stevenson, lines 121-124)

I think making myself available to parents. I do not hesitate to give out my cell phone number to parents. I certainly respond to emails over the weekend, over the holidays and 9 pm at night, 5 am in the morning, I respond. I feel that is important if the parent is taking the time to contact me then there must be something going on that I need to respond to. I think that is something that is transferred over in being available for parents at their convenience so if I have to call a parent and I am getting a voice mail, I will leave my cell phone number and tell them they can call me at any points. (Mr. Matthews, lines 275-281)

I would call the first week at least to introduce yourself to give parents an idea of what you will do and who you are. Try to call at least once/month because that sets the precedents that will allow you much more leverage when it comes to call parents later on. I tell my students, "Look, I will be calling this month, you know I am calling so the question is, what am I going to say?" (Mr. Moses, lines 137-141).

Although phone calls seemed to be the most regularly used communication tool, emails came in as a decisive and close second in regular usage. The effectiveness in comparison to purpose as well as timing and frequency of usage were the biggest difference between these two communication tools.

Emails

In the application of email as a communication tool, teachers tended to find effectiveness in the frequency of usage, the timing of them and the purpose of the usage such as for sharing simple, routine information or information of less serious infractions. These seemed to be the most appropriate applications of email. The advantages of emails included easy and quick exchanges, communication of essential information, and the ability to reach a mass number of people in a short period of time. The disadvantages included the lack of body language, of voice inflection, of eye contact, of time or content limit, of human touch, the possibility of misinterpretation, the temptation to write inappropriate emails based on emotions and having the content both in print and on the internet. In addition, emails written by the teachers who are effective with parents tended to have two patterns: sending home positive emails to share good news and the emails were usually written in the format that started with greetings, reporting facts, and then stating the issues followed by reporting the methods of interventions that have already used, and finishing with a request or invitation to parents to be part of the support and solution.

Find a mode of communication that they are comfortable with whether it would be email or phone and stay with that technique so that you can continue working on it. I mainly contact parents via email because it allows me to be more detailed and I know that the message is getting straight to the parents and it is not getting intercepted by the kids by accident and I know I am not contacting a parent while they are at work and if I am, that is their choice whether they choose to read the

email at that time or later but they have to figure out if they want to answer their cell phone because it is coming from the school and I also do not have a phone in my office this year so email is definitely a lot easier. I am also a very detailed person and it gives me a chance to edit what I have written and what I am trying to say and I will have a record of it and I can instantly save to my computer. So for me, that is the most comfortable so that is what I usually stick to when I have to contact parents. If people are more comfortable using their phone, then that is what they need to do. They need to stick with that and the other thing is I feel like you have to start off with something positive. (Mrs. Green, lines 169-182)

I do think email has made it easier for parents because it only takes a minute to shoot off an email and 25 years ago, they are not going to come up to school or they are not going to call. When I send you an email, I expect an immediately response which I think gives teacher a disadvantage. I should not say that, I really think emails are really for something quick and just giving someone a heads up or being proactive and giving a reminder about a major assignment or I took care of talking to your child about XXXXXX but I thought you should know also, that kind of stuff…these are all great things but at the same time, it also gives parents a way to contact you whereas 20 or 30 years ago, they may not have taken the time to make that phone call because it would have been a 3-4 day process calling each other back and find a time to meet. Nowadays with email, it can be good or bad. (Mrs. Benson, lines 256-269)

Even with email, it is tricky and you should write more vigorously because you are not facing the person and talk to them in person and they need a lot of training and do not write when you are really frustrated with the child and you might want to wait a day and write it or you might want to write an email and have someone else look over it and temper it because it is just too easy to say something that you should not. At least on the phone or in person, you would have that filter. Although this is the exact reason why I write emails so that if they say anything, I can show, this is what I said to you (Mrs. Darcy, lines 123-131).

Email is a highly efficient way to communicate with students and their families. With the newer technology, teachers are now able to have more choices in electronic communication from even a mere decade ago. However, out of all of the technology tools, email tended to be the most personal as other internet communications tended to be mostly general information in nature.

Website/internet/technology

In the application of technology and websites as a communication tool, teachers tended to find effectiveness in keeping many informed at the same time. Examples of technology tools are teacher websites, classroom blogs and online grade programs. The advantages of technology and websites include the convenience of sharing information without time constraints and easy access that allows the promotion of self-responsibility of students and parents. With the help of technology, information is readily available and it is up to students and parents to make the best use of it. The disadvantages of technology and websites include the potential difficulties with navigating some websites, and the amount of information can be cumbersome to sort through; the tools being

impersonal and easy to ignore and the lack of access of some families, especially lower

income families (Bouffard, 2008). However, as technology continues to advance, the

availability goes up and the cost comes down, the SES level of families and their access

to technology should become less and less of an issue. Having said that, the popularity of

smart phones seemed to be resolving some of those access issues for many families

already.

> If there is a question, they can usually find the answer on my website. My
> website is exhaustive. I have tried to teach both parents and students, from the
> beginning, to utilize my website and find answers and if you cannot find it, let me
> know. Anything they want to know about my class, it is right there. All of my
> power points, slide shows, they are there and here is what you need to know about
> it. (Mrs. Darcy, lines 87- 91)

> Making sure that you have some sort of website that explains what the homework
> is or parents can check homework without the students, keeping them in the loop
> so that you do not ever have to acknowledged that you put all of the responsibility
> on the student because they are 11 years old and you have to share it with parents
> and you should share it with parents. I think doing more than you think you need
> to really pays off. (Mr. Simon, lines 79-84)

> Technology, everybody is in the 21st century. I show them my website at open
> house and I show them the calendar that I have up for the year. "May" has been

on my calendar since last semester. I think with this whole smart phone movement, that has really changed the field and kind of leveled it out a little more (.....) a couple of years ago (.....) half of our parents would not have computers or internet at home. But now, even my students who do not have a computer or internet at home have a smart phone or a tablet so you know, mom and dad also has a smart phone so they are able to check their emails on their phone and I usually try to feel them out at the beginning of the year at parent/teacher conferences and we ask them how they prefer to be contacted and I have a lot of parents who prefer to be contacted over email because their emails are either directly sent to their phone or they are at work and they are able to check their emails and not be interrupted by a phone call in the middle of the day.

(Mr. Donaldson, lines 14-32).

In general, we believe Infinite campus (online grades program) has really made a difference and parents were constantly getting emails back and forth justifying or clarifying things. (Mrs. Long, lines 148-150).

Technology/website/internet have definitely enhanced the information sharing between school and home. The degree of effectiveness depended on the purpose, timing and frequency. It is clear that parents have more access to important information from school but how much that impacts the relationship between teachers and parents was not clear. Even as technology has positively enhanced the communication between teachers and parents, it is impossible to replace the warmth and intimacy of a face-to-face

encounter. According to Upham, Cheney & Manning (1998), face-to-face was the first choice of communication for both parents and teachers. Thankfully, schools continue to deem the one-on-one encounter between teachers and parents essential in their working relationship.

Face-to-face meeting

Face to face meeting is the communication method that requires the largest amount of time. Middle school teachers who often have 80-130 students (most teachers average between 100-120), face-to-face meetings with a large amount of parents was notably challenging in middle schools and that fact has been documented frequently in the research literature (Miertzky, 2004) as one of the biggest obstacles in parent/teacher relationships. For the most part, emails, website updates, and newsletters can be done in a relatively quick fashion in comparison to phone calls and face-to-face meetings. A couple of the participating teachers even made home visits as a form of face-to-face meetings. In the working relationship between parents and teachers, face-to-face meetings are most common for two reasons: parent/teacher conferences and dealing with negative issues of students.

> I think it takes years of experience and commitment to make parent phone calls, to have parent conversations, parent (..…) sometimes I go into the city and visit with parents and that is different every year. (Dr. Stevenson, lines 65-67)

> We have a home visit program and we are trained to do home visits but what I found interesting about that was it was not so much how you interacted with

parents, it was more on how to be polite, how to run the meetings. (Mr. Call, line 27-30)

When I sit down across from a parent, some of them have children that have straight A's and perform exceptionally well and they do everything that they are suppose to do which makes for an easy conference. One of things I know now, as a parent is all parents need to her what their child is like in class. I know that when the child has an A or B, the child is academically successful. They want to know more of the personal things. What I noticed in class? What is unique about their child personally and that lets them know that I do notice your child as your child and not just another student and there are personal attributes that stand out to me and there are unique things about your child that makes a difference to me and I notice that in the classroom. (Mrs. Long, lines 62-70)

Again, effective teachers found face-to-face meetings with parents highly effective yet they all found the same challenges with the issue of the lack of time to talk with parents face-to-face frequently. Utilizing a variety of communication tools seemed to be useful along with a few other tools that are only mentioned sporadically in the study yet the presence and necessity of these tools were clear.

Others tools

Other tools were mentioned in the interviews but they were not necessarily repeated often, and therefore, had no saturation in the data collection. These tools included handouts of expectations in class, various forms (i.e. field trip forms), newsletters and positive notes. These tended to be tools that are sprinkled among the

main tools such as phone calls, emails, websites and face-to-face meetings. Some of the common characteristics within these tools were the fact that they were short and concise but contained essential information, either giving or collecting; the general purpose was mass information exchange between school and home; they were generally short excerpts of writing often in the format of bullet points or blocks; they were often printed on color paper or white paper with color print to give notice from the general piles of paper that were in backpacks and the message was usually information-laced with warmth and invitations.

The purpose of these "secondary methods" was mainly to provide general information to the parents, but positive notes home were a vital exception to that rule. Positive notes were usually hand-written by teachers or even administrators. These notes were meant to give credit to some behavior, choice or achievement of students. The purpose was to recognize students and let parents know that the school recognized what students have done. Positive notes that were more personal in nature seemed to be valued the most. A hand-written note has the personal touch that no printed recognition can ever convey.

Preferred tools of teachers. This subcategory contained just one property, the ages of the teachers. In this study, the preference of communication tools was not clearly divided by age yet there is a pattern of general preference between the so call younger and older generation of teachers. As an example, older teacher (by age) tended to favor phone calls and face-to-face conversations while younger teacher (by age) seemed to prefer emails and websites. However, this is not an exclusive pattern, rather, it is presumed that the preference is mostly due to the amount of exposure and developed

habits towards technology from generational differences. Ultimately, effectiveness

actually came from the approaches to communication chosen by each participant.

Category 5: approaches to communication

This category is linked to the previous one not only with the selection of

communication tools but also in the timing and approaches to the communication. The

effectiveness in the combined usage of the various tools of communication came from the

wisdom, experiences and appropriate choices on the part of these successful teachers.

Their choices with when, how, why and with whom to apply these tools of

communication made, in their perception, the greatest impact in their relationship with

parents. The teachers' skills alone did not have the same impact without the application

of timing, purpose and message of the communication. For that reason, simply having

the tools to communicate was not enough, the approach was even more critical and

learning how to apply wisdom to these decisions tended to come from experience paired

with appropriate behaviors in the communications. There were several notable

approaches that the effective teachers had in common, these sub-categories include:

positive communication, balanced usage of mixed communication tools and listening to

parents and asking for help.

Positive communication

In accordance with previous research studies, one of the most important

approaches to communicate with parents was to communicate positive information in

regards to their children. Studies have shown that communication between parents and

teachers has traditionally been based on negative information or incidents and, as

expected, the trend tended to have a negative impact in the working relationship between parents and teachers (Ramirez, 2001 & Epstein, 2007). On the other hand, teachers who were aware of the importance of positive communication that took the time and effort to communicate positive information or at least started a conversation or working relationship with such information, tended to have positive and significant impact on the working relationship between teachers and parents.

> Pretty much what I figured out is hit them with positives and often so if you have to contact them about something negative, you have already talked to them before (Mrs. Benson, lines 33-34).

> The one thing that was reinforced even in your early teaching when you are talking with parents, you start with a positive, give constructive criticism and end with something positive. You know the whole sandwich concept (…..) The other thing that my team does is that we take turns to do positive emails so each week during our team meeting, we talk about who will send emails to which five kids that week and the response from the parents have been overwhelming because they said it is nice to hear good things about our kids because when we do have to talk to them later about something not as positive, we have already started some positive communication. (Mrs. Long, lines 7-10 & lines 281- 286)

> One of things that I learned was to open the line of communication early with positive communication. Even if you have negative communication that is necessary, always add some positives and another thing is I was an intern before I

student taught so one of the main things is not to let the fall parent/teacher conference be your first interaction with parents. (Mr. Charles, HSES, lines 93-97)

As important as positive communication is, the balance of using a mix of tools to communicate a variety of information to parents appeared to be the hallmark of the teachers who are effective in working with parents.

Balanced usage of mixed communication tools

Having communication tools alone was not enough. Teachers who were effective in working with parents have learned how to discern and pair up certain types of situations and purposes with particular tools of communication. In addition, these teachers have also discovered how to balance those choices with appropriate timing and frequency. Along with the content, the tone and the delivery, the execution was generally well planned from experience and with good judgment. These combined choices and approaches were also successfully paired with the expectations and demands of their school culture. This finding supports Ho's (2002) claim that parents not only wanted more communication from school but also needed special consideration in this working relationship with teachers.

That is the other thing too, there are teachers like brand new teachers are so accustomed to the email communication and calling on the phone for certain more sensitive topics that we should not deal with over the internet. These are the kinds of things that are hard to figure out when you are new and you are so used to email as the main form of communicating. (Mrs. Fuller, lines 169-173)

Here is another piece on communicating and you almost have to break it down to curriculum, extra curriculum and other categories for new teachers to figure it out. Like a web page and they should have an experience constructing one. All four quarter and every quarter have something different to learn. This is middle school and I want to treat it like the monthly newsletter. Here is a copy of my web page. I think teachers need to know how to do oral communication, written communication and web communication. When is it appropriate to do which of those things as well? When do you pick up the phone to call and when do you bring a parent in? (Dr. Stevenson, lines 173-180)

Positive communication and appropriate usage of communication tools were two of the most influential approaches to working with parents. However, when paired with approach timing and frequency, the essence of the effectiveness of the teachers grew exponentially. The wisdom of how and when to utilize which communication tools is unmistakable but another key component to communication is simply listening to parents and inviting them to be part of the process and solution.

Listening and asking for help

Listening has been a hallmark quality of good communication in almost any relationship. The effective teachers found that listening to parents was an important component to their working relationship. After all, teachers and parents both learned a lot about each other as well as the needs of the students by listening to each other. In addition, there was a component of including parents into the solution by asking for help. These teachers asked in the spirit of expecting the parents to be involved or at least showed a desire for parents to be involved with their children and their education.

Teachers who were unsure of their relationship with parents tended not to ask for help or involvement.

> I think that when you are in a situation where you would have a difficult conversation with a parent, may be they are upset with you, the best thing to do is to stay quiet and calm and just listen. (Mrs. Green, lines 187- 190).

> I would say listen! Let them talk and ask questions and try not to be defensive and understand that this is their child and that is something that I do not know if I would (…..) it is like teaching in general, you know (…..) how many tips you can give a person but you have to live through it and learn from your own mistakes. You know, I will definitely give them some of those advice and be like proactive and reach out to the parents and especially the ones that are hard to get a hold of and those kinds of things. (Mrs. Fuller, lines 148-153)

> I approach it with "I need your help" and that seems to be helpful to start off with, "I need your help and I am really having trouble with your child and please help me and trying to get them on my side and not coming at them with, "your kid is doing this or that" just trying to get them to help me and I have found that I have had more success with that approach of, "Hey, we are on the same team so let us work together to help Johnny or Susie" (Mr. Ballwin, lines 147-152)

The participating teachers were clear about the effectiveness of listening. This was not an automatic skill for every teacher. Some have had to work hard to acquire that

skill. Virtually all teachers had the same communication tools. How and when they are used proved to be the difference between a teacher's work with parents being average and effective. Timing and frequency of communication should not be underestimated for their impact on the effectiveness of communication overall. Clearly, there is no "cookie cutter" or "textbook" way to approach a solid teacher and parent working relationship. However, the knowledge of one's school, culture and expectations coupled with some of these approaches that are suggested by the effective teachers were great ways to start to build the working relationships with parents. One of the main elements in the approaches was the aspect of teacher beliefs, which was related to this category, but it was such an important and repeated aspect of approaches, it required a category of its own. After all, most people based their decisions and behaviors on their own beliefs so the aspect of teacher beliefs was noteworthy in this study.

Category 6: teachers' beliefs

While the method of communication, the timing, frequency of communication, the tone and the issues all mattered, the foundation of working with parents, at least partly, seemed to come from teachers' personal and professional beliefs along with their philosophy about the shared responsibility between parents, students and teachers. Belief is defined as the acceptance of truth of something (Merriam Webster, 2011). Effective teachers tended to believe that working with parents was a part of their professional responsibility and they also tended to be proactive in working with parents as a teacher. Within that belief structure was a secondary belief where the teacher is the professional in the relationship and should therefore be prepared to give professional advice or resources

to support parents and students.   In addition, many of these participating teachers saw parents as allies rather than adversaries. In any given relationship where one side viewed the contrasting side as complementary allies, the only thing that happened was the building of a positive relationship. Moreover, under this category, there were the following sub-categories: general teacher beliefs, being proactive, professional responsibility, shared responsibility and resource provider.

   General teacher belief

Teachers come into the teaching with some personal experiences and beliefs that guide their work with parents. These beliefs are often their foundational values prior to becoming a teacher. For example, a strong belief that education is the responsibility of everyone involved, a belief that parents and teachers are allies rather than enemies, the assumption of good will between home and school were some of the basic values.

Another thing that I always find that helps is that I always address or discuss the personality of the child and a lot of the, not just the behavior but things that they like to do, the things that they do well, how do they contribute to class, to group work…etc. This way, the parents realize that this is not just a teacher who is doing this as a profession but the teacher KNOWS MY CHILD, even though no one knows the child better than the parents. (Mr. Moses, lines 62-67)

The perspective I try to take is (and it is difficult if someone does not have their own kid) to just kind of step back and try not to take things personally and that is difficult because we give so much of ourselves in the classroom that it is

emotionally demanding and when someone criticizes or questions something that we do in the classroom, it feels like an attack and may be it is but if you can step back and thinks about the fact everyone just really wants the best for their child and I think that's universally true for all parents. They may not know what the best is or how to get there, but every person, every parent wants the best thing for their child. And if you can keep that in the front of your mind, you are angry about something and honestly I have never had a difficult relationship, certainly there have been times where I had to explain this is what is going on, this is what I am seeing, and if you can try to make it as objective as you can and acknowledge their point of view as they know their child better than anybody else. (Mr. Matthews, lines 146- 158)

Teachers' general beliefs typically came from their own personal experiences and values. That was the foundation of their philosophy in working with parents. However, general beliefs alone were not sufficient; teachers combined more active beliefs, some from their professional beliefs, in their pursuit of a working relationship with parents.

Being proactive

Proactive teachers had a tendency to take charge and be forward with their working relationship with parents. They were interested in staying ahead of the game and engaging parents before any incidents or issues occurred. These teachers were more likely to have a goal of actively pursuing a positive relationship with parents and not to be reactive with situations that arose.

Oh, just be proactive as opposed to being reactive. Schools tend to be reactive and the thing about being older is that I realize that there are things that need to happen for communication to work. (Mrs. Paul, lines 277-279)

Be proactive and communicate before the report card comes home and also to make sure that when there are legal documents with modification and things like that to really be communicating with parents and (…..)I think that is the number one thing to be the first one to say, "Here is what we are trying to do, what do you think? Or here is what is happening today. You know, rather than waiting for parents to bring something up. (Mrs. Fuller, lines 29-34)

You need to make this a high priority and make sure parents are in the loop. (Mr. Simon, lines 40-41)

Since teachers are generally not trained to work with parents, being proactive is a belief that presumably came from either personal experiences or values.   Being proactive implies some teachers have the conviction that it is their professional responsibility to approach, engage and build a positive working relationship with parents.

Professional responsibility

A sense of professional responsibility is important in each aspect of teaching. Teachers were charged not only with the responsibility to educate students with academic knowledge, they were also charged to develop their habits, a sense of responsibility and a curiosity for learning. Moreover, part of a teacher's responsibility is to work closely with

parents to further support the educational process of the students. Previous research studies did show that teachers who believed that working with parents was a part of their professional responsibility tended to put more effort into this area while some teachers struggled with accepting that responsibility at all. The studies also showed that teachers who did not accept working with parents as part of their professional responsibility tended to struggle with parents.

Parents can understand that you are somebody who is into their child and you are there for their kid and it is not just about the content. The relationship always comes before the content and if the relationship is not there, the teachers need to rethink that (…..) "My world just does not just exist within these four walls." Your world is not your four walls and also, how do you extend yourself in your community and what does that mean? When you extend yourself to your co-workers, you build a collaborative environment. When you extend yourself to your parents or to different committees. (Dr. Stevenson, lines 25-27 & lines 52-56)

A lot of that comes with experiences but if we can organize some of that ahead of time would be helpful. So I think a program that you are teaching needs to help people understand to have those things ready and available as they make contact with parents. (Mr. Peterson, lines 123-126)

I have always kept that as a pretty high priority whenever I am communicating with parents. (Mr. Simon, lines 26-27)

We do have parents that do not care and my responsibility is to be able to communicate with them. That is part of my job as a teacher. (Mr. Call, lines 186-188)

Teachers' sense of professional responsibility is the first and foremost step in building a working relationship with parents. However, building a working relationship implied at least a two party involvement and in this case, the participating teachers fully believed in the shared responsibility between teachers and parents in the education process of students.

Shared responsibility

Teachers who subscribed to the notion that education is a shared responsibility between parents, students and teachers (much like the equilateral triangle analogy in chapter one, p.20) had a tendency to communicate openly to both parents and students about sharing and cooperating for the purpose of higher achievement in students' education and higher accountability in students' behaviors and choices.

I just always think it is the team aspect: The parents, the students and the teacher all involved in learning together and if the parent component is missing, that also means one of the components is missing as well. So where I am at right now, I try to keep my parents as informed as possible so they can all hold their children

accountable with what they are supposed to be doing, their behaviors and their academics here at school as well. (Mr. Donaldson, lines 8-12)

"Your child is not meeting my expectations and just so you know that if it keeps going on, then it is an office issue but right now, it is just an issue between me, you and the student. And if you take care of your side and I will take care of my side, we can take care of this issue right now and then it does not have to become an office issue." So that is kind of my way of taking that approach right now. Right now, I kind of look at it as an opportunity to talk with a parent and I get to. (Mr. Smith, lines 26-31)

One of us should call and in a week, we will give another updated phone call. This way, the parent can see that everyone is involved and supporting their child and this is a big deal. (Mr. Stanley, lines 236-238)

Beyond the standard partnership between teachers and parents, there is an extra component that is not often discussed or recognized outwardly by parents, teachers or researchers is the responsibility that teachers have to be a resource for the parents. In general, resource is referred to as help, solutions or assets. As discussed in chapter one, many parents struggle to find appropriate resources and support both for middle school age students and for being parents of middle school age children. Therefore, a common and easy access provider of reliable resources is a middle school teacher. As an example, whether parents and teachers have a close working relationship or not, middle school teachers are regarded as experts of middle school age children. Often, they are the ones

who send home flyers with verified information or put helpful links on their websites for parents to utilize. Another example would be parents seeking names of vetted tutors or activities from their child's teachers.

   Resource provider

   Parents of middle school students are often unsure of the students' needs as well as the appropriate resources to meet their needs. For most parents, middle school teachers are their source for professional guidance, support and a resource for tools and services that are appropriate for this age group. Another aspect of teachers being resource providers is providing information and support to parents on goals, communication and strategies of being parents of teenagers and how to help them be successful in school (Epstein, 1984, Hill & Tyson, 2009).

   Once you get good at that, then parents start contacting you when they start seeing issues because they have their knee jerk reactions and so a lot of your job as a teacher is to educate them on what to do. (Mr. Peterson, lines 89- 92)

   At one point, we had tutor lists available. I learned to have a stack of that type of resource. The other thing that for a while, parents asked about this or that tutoring center or services. I did not know anything about those so I could not even comment. So I did do some research when I realized that it was a pattern. So know what are the resources available in your community because parents ask about them and to think about the fact that I needed to do homework for that type of information as well. (Mrs. Long, lines 209-215)

In order for teachers to build an effective working relationship with parents, teachers not only had to be guided by a system of professional and personal beliefs while utilizing various communication tools, they also needed to draw together appropriate support for themselves. This support system was critical for the execution of the work.

Category 7: supports for teachers

Effective teachers believed in their responsibilities towards working with parents but they were wise enough to know that they cannot accomplish this aspect of their work by themselves. They found the necessary support to work effectively with parents and many of them cited support from administrators, counselors, fellow teammates and even parents themselves as critical in their work. Within this category, there were five sub-categories including administration, teachers, counselors, parents and others.

Administration

In previous research studies, administrators were referred to as the catalyst in the building of working relationships between parents and teachers (Chapter 2, p.81). Their support was particularly crucial to the success of those relationships (Ganser, 2001 & Protheroe, 2001). Some of the reasons included the tone that the leader of the school sets for the building, the ability to give foundation support, the power to make final decisions and the authority to protect teachers from unreasonable demands and attacks. However, the most important reason was the guidance and support administrators can and should provide to teachers.

> When you talk to them, they engage you in conversation and you can just knock on their office door and they do not say, "Can you come back later? Or could you

shoot me an email about this? Or I do not have time to speak with you now, can you make an appointment?" You can just walk into their office and have a conversation. (Mrs. Green, lines 267-270)

In our school, I think we have a pretty strong relationship with administration and I feel like as long as we are not throwing them under the bus, as long as we are informing them of what is going on, they are pretty supportive of what we do. (Mr. Matthews, lines 73-76)

I have always had very supportive administrators (……) Very, very supportive. They believed in me and in what I had to do to control the classroom. They supported my decisions, especially when it came to discipline and all the way across the board. I think, that really gave me the confidence to speak more candidly with my parents where as I see other teachers who just stay professional and keep that professional language with parents. (Mr. Moses, lines 25- 32)

Although administrative support was the most critical to teachers' work with parents, it was also the least available on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, the second most critical support generally came from teachers who were either seasoned teachers that are given the task to mentor or team teachers who bonded together to carry out their work with parents. Support from teachers was equally significant but in a different manner than administrative support.

Teachers

In addition to administrators, teachers often relied on each other to support their work with parents. Middle school teachers are often put into teams where they work together to help each other handle issues on the team both with parents and with students. The support of each other was invaluable and necessary. Problems were often resolved with parents from the joint effort of teachers. Furthermore, since there are usually between 80-130 students on a middle school team, teachers also supported each other by dividing the workload of communication and follow-through with parents.

> I think mostly it has been peer sharing and during team (planning time), we work very closely together as a team and we respond to parents often as a team and we share our parent correspondence on our team and if I am sending an email to one of my parents, I always copy one of my teammates and sometimes I will consult with a teammate before I send anything out (…..) the wording (…..) to see what they see and see if it is a common issue. (Mr. Matthews, lines 57-61)

> We on our team, 7th grade team and we will do pair calls for the two of us. Usually the one who is elder, more experienced or more apt for this will do the calling and we will kind of run through the phone call together first and then we will make the call. We will talk about what we are seeing in class, the other will usually say that they are seeing the same thing and so the person making the phone call will introduce themselves and then start off with some factual report of

what we are seeing in class and the other person will get on later and hope to break the tension down. (Mr. Stanley, lines 142- 148)

It has been said that a teacher is not an island, as rarely does a teacher work alone. Besides regular support from administrators and teachers, another vital elementary in the support system that is required to work with parents successfully is the role that counselors play. Counselors served two very critical roles. One, counselors are often the source for important information from students' homes. Two, they are the glue that bound school and home.

Counselors

Although administrators are the catalyst in the working relationship between teachers and parents, counselors also play an intricate role in supporting teachers to work with parents. Their role is more informational and relational than foundational support, yet it is equally important. Teachers often relied on counselors not only for factual and updated information on students and their families, but also to intervene and act as the bridge that connects school and home.

I also rely on the counselors. It helps to know that there is something much more important going on at home and that is better to know before you make the call rather than after you make a call with that information so I definitely rely on the counselors a lot. (Mr. Peterson, lines144-147)

I think we have a wonderful counselor who shares information with us.

We have two 6th grade teams and there is a counselor that is designated to our team, that might not be right but we definitely have a 6th grade counselor that covers our team specifically. She will share information as necessary and we will share with her as we see things come up and that's a really good working relationship. (Mr. Matthews, lines 76-81)

Administrators, teachers and counselors are the expected parts of a support system but a surprising element that was brought up in this study is the support from parents.

Parents

Parents can be a surprising yet, valuable asset to teachers who are working hard to connect and work with them. Although parents are not a part of the school team of administrators, counselors or fellow teachers, their positive input, support, encouragement and appreciation could fuel and encourage teachers to continue to work with parents. After all, the ultimate positive reinforcement is having success in working with parents as a teacher.

OH YEAH!! Definitely but also because I have gotten positive responses from parents that I have contacted. (Mrs. Green, lines 144-145)

Other times they will say, "Oh, they are supposed to play ball this weekend and now they are not going to." Hold something over their heads and until they get a report for improved behaviors and some parents will follow through with it. (Mr. Ballwin, lines 157-159)

There are some tremendously supportive parents and just (…..) I have had a lot of families that I have taught that are so complementary and sometimes they say, "Oh, we are so happy to have you again!" and you know, there are definitely great parents who are not afraid to give you praise, specific praise and talk to the administrators about you. Yeah, so I have had plenty of positive reactions. (Mrs. Fuller, lines 63- 68)

Of course parental support is not required in a support system but it is often welcomed and appreciated. In addition to administrators, teachers, counselors and parents, there are other forms of support that teachers need in order to build successful working relationships with parents.

Others

Above and beyond the group of people in the support system for teachers to work with parents, there were two less frequently mentioned yet significant resources: time and translators.

Time. Time is a precious and non-renewable resource. One of the issues with time is the fact that middle and high school teachers generally taught 80-130 students. For that reason, finding time to work with or at least keeping such a large number of parents well informed is challenging at best. It is a strenuous task even for effective teachers. This fact has been well documented in previous research studies. This component has a direct link to the administrative support because leaders of schools have the authority to decide how much time teachers were allotted to work with parents

outside of actual teaching time. The wisdom in time management in regards to working with parents will only get developed with experience and being given time to do so.

> We used to have team time here and we would talk about things one hour and prep for another hour and we would be able to hold those types of conversations. We have actually talked about how to get that time back because it is so beneficial especially (.….) Now we do not even have common preps within our departments. (Mr. Donaldson, lines 161-165)

> We have our time to do our phone call and it is on our own and it is during our prep time on the one time that we have a day and after that, if you are making contact, we will have to do it on our own time and the principal requires us to contact the parents to inform them of what happened before he calls home and to me, that starts a road block right away because I have x amount of hours to do my job and he needs to take that into context. (Mr. Smith, lines 247- 252)

Time is an issue for all middle school teachers, even with responsible teammates. Unfortunately, this is especially true with low SES schools, as they tended to have less planning time. Furthermore, for selected schools that are filled with EL (English learner) students, translators are a must in the support system.

Translators. Aside from the administrator, teachers and counselor, other professionals such as translators are highly important to a teachers' working relationship with parents, particular parents of EL students. Without them and the ability to have

common language, the working relationship between parents and teachers seemed unattainable at best.

> I was in a bilingual chapter I classroom so having someone interpret was not an issue at all. Your relationship with the translator was important because if the TA (Teacher assistant who is also the translator) knew you well and knew you personally, their translation can reflect not only your words but who you are as a teacher because if you had someone who did not know you, their expression in what they are trying to convey may not be the same coming across to the parents. (Mrs. Rhodes, lines 64-69).

Building an effective working relationship with parents is, at the very least, a group effort that required an elaborate support system led by the administrative team and held together with fellow teachers, counselors and even sparks of encouragement from parents. Sadly, this complex yet essential relationship is not actively being taught to the new generation or the current generation of teachers. In this study, participants fervently gave suggestions in hopes to begin the process of future training of teachers.

Category 8: suggestions

The suggestions from both effective teachers and student teachers for the future teacher training in the area of working with were most helpful in this research study. The researcher received some expected suggestions but there were also many new and innovative ideas about how the universities can do a better job in preparing teachers to work with parents effectively. The suggestions can be broken down to several sub-

categories: Sample and examples, panels, scenarios, actual experiences, school year

calendar, modeling, reframing from assumptions, mentoring and others. These

suggestions were meant to be components of potential future trainings for teachers to

work with parents. The combination of these components seemed to be logical because

they mirror an outstanding class that would consist of a balance of lectures, examples,

discussions, actual or field experiences, modeling and mentoring the development of

skills, knowledge and critical thinking.

Samples and examples

Some of the participating teachers indicated not only were they unprepared to

work with parents, they had no idea what they needed to do or how to do it. As a matter

of fact, many of them had never even seen a sample of an email or newsletter, nor have

they been taught the logistics of events and encounters with parents. The implication was

not knowing how to and what to prepare for encounters with parents made the actual

encounters even more anxiety-driven. For example, teachers stated that even though they

knew parent/teacher conference was a must in a teacher's life, they had no idea how to

get ready for one or to execute one. The purpose of these suggestions was to show

samples and examples of schedules, emails, newsletters, websites and other forms of

communication so pre-service teachers would have some idea of how to create these

communication tools.

I think it needs to be before student teaching. It should be a class and they teach

you think like keeping a log of phone calls, or print off every email, when was it?

What was it about? I think it is really, really important to keep records and that is

so important to teach, to teach the undergraduates. Here are some samples of (…..) here is what a log looks like and then talk to them about early and first contact, how do I deal with a parent who is upset, when is it okay to hang up the phone on a parent? When is it okay for me to walk out of the room and say, "I am going to stop this conference right now, once we are not angry anymore, we can meet again or I suggest that we meet with one of the administrators." so they know what all of their resources are, how to handle all of the situations that are going to come their way. (Mrs. Coats, lines 174-183)

The other things too when you become an administrator and take the administrative test there are all of the sample situations on that test that we have to respond to, that made me think about this course and the need to talk to different people from a variety of SES school districts and get different sample situations where kids are getting into trouble for different problems and then what you can do is to categorize the different SES needs and categorize the sample situations and help these soon to be teachers figure out what they need to do because different places need different solutions. (Mr. Ballwin, lines 208-210)

Providing samples and examples of communication tools was just the beginning of the list of suggestions given by these participating teachers who are effective in working with parents. They also suggested various panels in class for the purpose of discussion, questions and answers of different topics that were related to working with parents.

Panels

Panels, in this study, are defined as a group of speakers that share a common area of interest or expertise. Participants in this study suggested four types of panels: administrators, veteran teachers, parents and even teenage students. The purpose of the suggestion was for pre-service teachers to be able to listen to expert advice and be able to ask questions from these panels about how to work with parents.

You can have discussions at your table but you can also have veteran teachers or teachers who have had a variety of experiences to be there to kind of probe or prod at those teachers and really pull a lot out of them and you would have really good discussions about what was going on. (Mrs. Green, lines 343-346)

I think this would be very helpful and maybe even talking to parents and even a parent panel and here are some great things that teachers do and here are some things that we (parents) really wish teachers would not do. Me not being a parent, it would have been nice to have a panel of parents say this is what a teacher did and that made a huge difference or one teacher did this and it may seem innocuous or a waste of time and it was not helpful. Those are the types of things that would be helpful for someone to hear. Especially someone like me who has been teaching a while because fresh ideas are always great and I will take whatever. (Mrs. Benson, lines 222-229)

I think they also need a panel of kids (…..) it would not be appropriate to do this with elementary school but middle school kids can and would tell you (…..) and 6th graders would be inappropriate but 7th graders, the thoughts are still fresh and it is kind of like this, when you have an ineffective teacher in the building, they personally do not know why they are ineffective but everyone is talking about them. (Dr. Stevenson, lines 233-237)

Each of the suggestions for training teachers to work with parents had a unique purpose to the activity. The panels served the purpose of hearing a common voice from a specific group of individuals who were integral parts to this working relationship between teachers and parents in the field.

Scenarios

Scenarios were probably the most popular, and seemingly needed, suggestion from the participants. They consisted mostly of case studies and mock situations. Many participants pointed out that simply having knowledge and examples were not enough. Nearly of all of them felt that having the opportunity to practice how to reply to a negative email or answer an irate phone call were necessary experiences in preparing to work with parents on the job.

Yeah, as an undergrad, with the technology that we have today, I would have a mock phone conversation with parents: an aggressive one, a passive one and that would be great because you can set up a semester class, I would incorporate that and I would have a spot where you can respond to a situation like as a case study and here is a student and here is what they have done and now you need to make

contact and you might have to figure out how to respond or you might have a programmed response that you can use (…..) I think that would be an amazing thing for students to run over and over and you can brain-storm afterwards with other students and have a discussion in class about it. I think something like that would just be eye opening and the only other thing is student teaching. (Mr. Smith, lines 305-314)

Set up scenarios, role-play such as "Johnny is having a hard time behaving in school. He never has a pencil in class. This is the third day I have noticed it" and you had to contact the parents, what would you say? How would you approach it? Then set up fake responses. How would you respond to a positive answer? "Johnny has the ten pencils that I bought him so he better be in class with those tomorrow." To a negative answer? "Johnny says that he has pencils in your class and you are picking on him." How would you respond? Create those things and have them respond. All of those and even with email, it is tricky and you should write more vigorously because you are not facing the person and talk to them in person and they need a lot of training and do not write when you are really frustrated with the child and you might want to wait a day and write it or you might want to write an email. (Mrs. Darcy, lines 114- 126)

After reviewing samples/examples of communication tools, hearing from panels of experts and practicing with case studies, the next crucial part seemed to be having some experiences in various types of school, preferably schools at all three SES levels.

Actual experiences

Since the placements of student teaching assignments do not always parallel pre-service teachers' first jobs, the ideal experience would be to having spent time in each of the SES level schools. As an example, if a student teacher grew up in a middle SES background and student taught at a high SES school, he/she would probably struggle with a first job at a low SES school. A handful of participants even suggested a full year student teaching experience where first semester will be full time at one SES school while splitting 3rd and 4th quarter of the school year at the other two SES schools in order to learn something from each type of environment and culture.

I think they should see somebody do it first and see how they (…..) what constitutes getting a parent involved. Look at a XXXXXXX (high SES school) and look at a XXXXXX (Middle SES school) and look at a place like this and, it will be hard for a student teacher to get to know everything about what is going on in that building and what is going on with a kid and if you are looking at all three but you obviously will not have the time, but to see the same situation and look at it in three different schools and play it out and look at it at XXXXX (Mid SES school) and look at it here, the same thing is going on, the kid is habitually disturbing class and find teachers who will basically the same way and getting a parent involved or whatever and how they have to approach those parents and then turn around and ask that teacher right then and there, "did it play out the way it's suppose to? What surprised you? Are you happy with the outcome? You

know, do you think it will change?" and then follow up with them to kind of look

at the supports in place that they received (Mr. Ballwin, lines 373-387).

Well, I would provide the experience of being in different populations and

training people on how to, and of course I have not thought about how it would

be, identify the parent population group and in terms of the area. (Mrs. Rhodes,

lines 211-213)

Having time and experiences in each SES level school could only add enrichment

and understanding to teaching all types of students as well as reaching all types of

parents. Following that experience, it appeared to be logical to discuss the typical events

of the school year that involved interaction with parents.

School year calendar

School year calendar was first suggested by participant one as the syllabus for the

teaching training class on how to work with parents. Her logic was even though most

student teachers are aware of what is on a typical school year calendar; it did not mean

they knew what to and how to prepare for the events that had components of parental

interaction. By using the school year calendar as the syllabus, most representative events

would at least be discussed in a training class.

Yeah, structure it kind of like a school year. Beginning of the year maybe you are

doing a newsletter and stuff and talk about what beginning of the year is like for

teachers. What is parent/teacher conference interaction like? What is progress

report interaction like? What is report card interaction like? What is "your kid is

doing awesome" interaction like? What is interaction for reporting your kid misbehaves everyday like? What if your kid has an F but he/she is still an amazing child interaction like? All of the possible scenarios as if it was like a calendar from August to May. (Mrs. Green, lines 370- 376)

I think that it would be awesome to walk through the school year calendar and talk about what are the expectations that schools have for teachers when it comes to conference time and I think that it would be interesting. (Mr. Matthews, lines 210-218)

Using the school calendar as a guide is a simple yet logical, practical and even cost effective way to educate beginning teachers about their pending interactions with parents. Once these young teachers were aware of what events involved parents, they needed some modeling of what excellent interactions with parents looked like.

Modeling

Even with all of the other sub-categories, many participants felt a strong need to have the skills modeled for the pre-service teachers so that they could visualize how the skills are carried out. As an example, watching excellent examples of interactions between parents and teachers in a video taped conference would meet this need for modeling how to accomplish a successful interaction with parents.

Well, I can see if there was a course, having some real parents volunteer to do some simulation, conversations, something, and they actually got some advice from teachers on how to talk to kids and adults, just to get their feet wet and the

main thing with dealing with parents is you have to make decisions really quickly

based on. Whatever happens, if you had some experience especially before your

first year of teaching, I mean, I guess you could maybe and maybe this can be

allowed and video parent/teacher conversations and maybe ask parents if they

would be okay with it and tell them that this is for a university class and they will

use it to observe and maybe "what do you make of it" type of thing and talk about

what are good strategies and what did not work and (…..) and maybe student

teachers have to participate in after school activity and I do not know how many

are required to attend parent/teacher conferences (Mrs. Fuller, lines 191-201).

Yeah, I think what would help new teachers need some resources. Templates of

things that you can send or templates for different occasions of the year would

help and having those resources would be helpful. Critiques and modeling for

what it should look like, be supportive, having supports for parents when issues

arise (Mr. Peterson, lines 115-118).

In order for professors or administrators to train teachers to work successfully

with parents, they not only needed to provide the suggested training for the teachers, they

also needed to make no assumption that teachers, especially beginning teachers, know

what they should or how they should do. Many people who are in charge of new teachers

in some capacity assume that teachers already have some knowledge base in the area of

working with parents when, in fact, this study documented that this is a false assumption.

Reframing from assumptions

Several participants mentioned that persons such as administrators, other teachers and even parents made assumptions that newer teachers not only knew what they were supposed to do but also how to do them when in fact they do not. The pressure of assumed knowledge frequently discouraged beginning teachers from asking for help for the fear of seeming unprepared or even stupid. Participants wished that people who are in charge, such as administrators, would not assume knowledge and know-how from beginning teachers; rather, they would replace that assumption with support and guidance. Perhaps this was not a necessary topic to address in a training class but nonetheless, it seemed important to bring up.

Yes, yes, I think it would be nice if people did not assume new teachers just know how to talk to parents. You know, it is assumed or forgotten that they (new teachers) have never had to do that before. As a student teacher, you may or may not have had the experience to talk to parents so who was I supposed to learn that from? (Mrs. Green, lines 293-297)

Mentoring

Beginners from every profession relied on and required some degree of mentoring. The profession of teaching is front and center with that need. The need for mentoring was well documented throughout the literature. Having said that, it seemed logical to start during new teacher orientation days. Specifically, these pre-service teachers needed some guidance and mentoring in order to begin to execute those

challenging skills of working with parents. Some have even suggested that working with parents may very well be the most intimidating part of the teaching profession.

> I think that would be helpful, helping student teachers think through what parents might want to know. They should also talk about what formats of parent/teacher conferences are and I know we never talked about that at school and it was not until I stood as a first year teacher listening to teachers debate the various formats of conferences. Student led conferences, meeting directly with parents, how to help kids prepare a portfolio so just formats of conferences and I think that would have been helpful to know. It may not be just you sitting down with a parent so what do parents want to know, format and how to give constructive feed back to a parent because that is sometimes not the same because sometimes, the constructive feed back is just what they are working on academically and in kid language but adults who have not sat in your class, they might not understand and does not have the knowledge of what you are doing in class. (Mrs. Long, lines 189- 200)

The beginning of mentorship, especially at the undergraduate level, could possibly bring about a much-needed sense of security that would settle the fear and anxiety that every new teacher has. Learning is frequently enhanced by supplementary experiences in addition to the required ones.

Others

A few participants talked about the importance of having the opportunity to learn from some other experiences at different jobs. The logic behind that is gaining skills that

only non-teaching jobs provided that would enhance the ability to work with parents.
The point was no particular training program at any university could provide the full
experience but adding other non-teaching on the job experience might. An example of
that would be working in the retail world to learn about the concept of customer service,
which paralleled greatly with working with parents. This idea was briefly touched on in
the personal experience category earlier in this chapter.

> I think it would be awesome if you can give student teachers an opportunity
> where they are put in some environment where they are dealing with people who
> are just upset.   For example, I think of a tech support person because everybody
> that they talk to is upset and they are really good at handling upset people and if
> you can give a potential teacher that type of experience so that when they are
> faced with a parent conference with someone who is completely irate with them,
> they do not lose their cool because if I lose my cool too, the situation just gets
> worse. And those are the situations that seem to bleed into my career and in some
> situation, the counselor is calling me about it, other teachers are talking to me
> about it. (Mr. Simon, lines 114-123)

Altogether, there were many practical and useful suggestions for future training of
middle school teachers to work effectively with parents, additional studies would be
needed in order to maximize the value of these suggestions within a training course.

Conclusion

Most teachers begin their teaching voyage with a fitting amount of education in content knowledge, teaching pedagogy and related skills. Unfortunately, the same cannot be claimed in the area of working with parents. The purpose of this research study was to learn from middle teachers who have highly effective working relationships with parents. Although the statistics of training teachers to work with parents has improved according to Epstein (2005), every non-college teacher is expected to have contact with parents of their students, regardless of subject, age or types of school that they teach in, they are asked to do so with little formal or systematic training. The predictable path for this journey begins with the lack of or very little education from the university in learning how to engage and work with parents. Even after they have completed student teaching and arrived at their first job, the problem continues with the lack of professional development in the same area, leaving teachers with few options. Typically, novice teachers are loaded with fears and anxieties, beginning teachers start teaching with no real understanding of what is expected or how to go about working with parents of their students, which only compounds their existing apprehension.

Without training or knowledge, teachers were left the option of seeking help on their own. They begin with the foundation of their own beliefs about working with parents and then they set out to look for some guidance. The scenario often played out with some mentoring, observations or worse yet, trial and error on their own. When few of those scenarios exist, these novice teachers end up falling back on their personal experiences such as previous non-teaching job, childhood occurrences and perhaps family or friends' help. One thing that nearly all schools commonly provide is the

various communication tools such as telephone, email, website and conference times. Even with the provision of communication tools, teachers must learn appropriate approaches to take in order work with parents successfully.

Even as teachers gather their knowledge about working with parents, they still need support from the school in the form of administrators, fellow teachers, counselors and they need even time in order to find success in reaching parents. The participating effective teachers as well as student teachers shared many valuable suggestions hoping to improve training for future teachers. The result of this research study has provided the steps on the path of learning from middle school teachers who are highly effective with parents.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In her 2005 article titled *Communicating with Parents: Strategies for Teachers*,
Graham-Clay, advocating for greater parent/teacher partnership, said, "In today's society,
schools and parents are responding to increased expectations, economic pressures, and
time constraints. In these changing times, effective partnerships between teachers and
parents become even more essential to meet the needs of the children they 'share'"
(p.117). This qualitative study examined the steps on the path of middle school teachers'
learning, who work effectively with parents. This chapter presents a brief summary of
the study along with a discussion, recommendations and the conclusion.

Summary of methods and procedures

The study consisted of two parts: semi-structured interviews and focus group
interviews. Data were collected from three main sources: middle school teachers, middle
school student teachers and pertinent documents. Eighteen middle school teachers (six
high SES, six middle SES, six low SES middle schools) who have effective working
relationships with parents participated in semi-structured interviews. Their own building
administrators recommended the participants. The underlying assumption is that each
building administrator has sound knowledge and judgment about his/her own faculty
members and their effectiveness with parents. This researcher did not ask for
recommendations from parents, other teachers or students. Among the participants, there
were nine males and nine females ranging in age from 21-65 and teaching experiences

from beginning to nearly 40 years. Sixteen participants are Caucasian and two are minority, one Asian and one African American. There were 15 core-subject and three elective teachers. They taught at middle schools ranging in sizes from 200 to 1,000 students. Each teacher was asked to provide the researcher with relevant documents that pertain to building working relationships with parents; eleven out of eighteen did so. The majority of the interviews took place at teachers' own classroom at their school. The following questions were addressed with each of the participants during the semi-structured interviews:

1. What factors may have influenced your development in working with parents? Explain.

2. Have you experienced any major transformations in your life experiences, education or job in the area of working with parents? Explain.

3. By what process did you develop your effectiveness in working with parents?

4. If other teachers want to develop in the area of working with parents, what suggestions would you offer to them? Please cite actual examples from your own experiences in your explanation.

5. Any final thoughts before we conclude this interview?

The SES levels of their student teaching assignment schools were used to divide current middle school student teachers into two focus groups. Originally, three groups were planned (high SES, middle SES, low SES) but even after an exhaustive search, it proved impossible to find student teachers willing to participate in the middle SES group. As a result, there were only two focus groups. The participants were volunteer student teachers from a number of local universities. They were not screened by a set of explicit

criteria; rather, the only requirement was to be a student teacher in a public middle school.

The High SES focus group was more than three times larger than the Low SES focus group. Within the HSES focus group, there were seven participants and one participant was male while the other six were female. They ranged in age from early twenties to fifty years old. In addition, two of them completed their student teaching as elective teachers while five others taught core subjects. In the LSES focus group, there were only two participants. Both of them were female and ranged in age from early to late twenties and both were student teachers of core subjects. Both SES focus groups utilized the same designated note taker during the interviews. However, the interview questions for the focus group interviews were different because the student teachers did not have the same experiences or input as the teachers. Each focus group was asked the following questions during their interview:

1. Tell me what specific skills/lessons did you learn about working with parents in your student teaching assignment experience?

2. Share with me about your preparation in working with parents from your university course work or field experiences prior to your student teaching assignment.

3. What else do you think would have been helpful to you in terms of working with parents and why?

4. If you could change anything about your experiences (course work, requirements, field-experiences, observations, student teaching…etc.), which would make you

feel more prepared to work with parents, what would you change? What would

you keep the same? Why or why not?

5. What are your final thoughts (round robin sharing)?

Both semi-structured and focus group interviews were transcribed by this

researcher from digital audio recordings, after which, transcripts were reviewed by this

researcher and analyzed several times. The results allowed this researcher to answer the

research question:

Building an effective working relationship with parents: What are the steps of

learning for middle school teachers?

From the analyzed data, eight categories emerged, namely the amount of training,

methods of learning, personal experiences, communication tools, approaches to

communication, teacher beliefs, support system and suggestions.   All of the categories

had sub-categories, properties and dimensions. Some of these categories confirmed

previous findings in the existing literature while other categories provided some new

insights into the world of working relationships between middle school teachers and

parents. This chapter will include a discussion of results from within the study, a

discussion of results in relationship to the literature, in addition, it will cover quality

standards, limitations and give recommendation for future studies.

<center>Discussion within the study</center>

The eighteen middle school teachers from the semi-structured interviews varied in

their gender, age, subjects taught, certifications, degrees, school districts and experiences;

yet their sincere belief in working with parents closely as well as their devotion to the task bind them in a common place together. The nine middle school student teachers from the focus group interviews varied in gender, age, subjects taught, certifications, degrees and learning experience were geared up to share their learning from the university and student teaching. From the expertise of the middle school teachers and the experiences of both groups, eight categories were established from the analyzed data as the steps on the path of learning to develop working relationships with parents in middle schools.

All participants, teachers and student teachers, recognized the beginning of their teaching careers was filled a deficiency in knowledge about working with parents, which created fear and anxiety. Each participant felt unprepared as well as unsure about where they would find sources of learning about parents yet they were all aware of their professional responsibility of interacting with parents. Another commonality among the teachers is the lack of professional development offered in or outside of school districts in the area of working with parents. None of the participating teachers received any professional development that was directly for the purpose of learning to work with parents, and only a handful of teachers said that they had a small amount of professional development which, while not meant specifically for working with parents, participants did learn some skills that aided them in that area. Student teachers did not share this concern because they have not yet officially begun their teaching careers. Even though this study was specifically focused on middle school teachers, the infrequency of training to work with parents is a problem for teachers of all grade levels and subjects. This common concern will be discussed further in regards to the literature in the next section.

In chapter four, the steps of the path of learning for teachers to work with parents were established from the data. Almost all of the teachers started with little to no training in universities as undergraduate students. Often, teachers began their first teaching position unprepared to work with parents. Therefore, they were left with a few methods of learning by being mentored, by observing and unfortunately, by trial and error as well. Moreover, teachers drew from their personal experiences that ranged from being parents to doing other types of jobs. Furthermore, teachers learned to utilize the variety of communication tools that are widely available at most schools. However, the effectiveness of teachers came from the wisdom in the usage of the communication tools for specific purposes. These steps of learning to work with parents were supported by teacher's own beliefs and these beliefs expand from positive communication to professional responsibilities. Finally, regardless of a teacher's specific path of learning, he/she required support and resources from the school, which included administrators, counselors, teachers, other support staff and the need for time. Again, details of the results were elaborated in chapter four. Above and beyond the eight categories that were developed, some comparative results were not yet explicated in chapter four. Noteworthy patterns that showed up in the comparison of teachers and student teachers; high, middle and low SES schools; teachers who are parents and teachers who are not and teachers who are older and younger in age.

Comparison of teachers and student teachers

In the comparison of teachers and student teachers, both groups had little to no training during their undergraduate education in the universities. However, there was a slight difference between the two groups within their training experiences. The teacher

group reported that they received nearly no training or some unexpected discussions in random education classes at their respective universities. Comparably, the student teacher group shared about the rarity of formal classes but within the bits and pieces of discussions in related classes, they felt like they were told what to do but not how to work with parents. Specifically, there were no explanations, demonstrations or exercises.

Teachers and student teachers had similar desires to work effectively with parents and also similar struggles with their fears and anxiety, at least during the beginning of teaching. The main difference between these two groups, obviously, was the level of experience and know-how. Experienced teachers had established their steps on their path of learning to work with parents while student teachers were still asking questions about how they will learn to work with parents. Some student teachers even admitted that they did not even know what to ask or what to anticipate. Both teachers and student teachers were able to draw from their personal experiences to support their own work with parents. In terms of communication tools, both groups had access to comparable devices but student teachers have not had many opportunities to practice using the tools. They have mainly just observed other teachers' communication with parents. Similarly, in the area of teacher beliefs, teachers had already established beliefs while student teachers were still developing them. In terms of support and resources, both groups welcomed all of the supports but differ in the actual experience in the utilization of the supports. Teachers mainly relied on the authority of administrators and the teamwork of fellow teachers whereas student teachers essentially relied on their cooperating teachers.

And in a really challenging situation, I would ask an administrator, "What do I do in this situation?" and I find it helpful that they kind of give you a script to follow or writing down notes before you speak to that parent and I think that's appropriate too. (Mrs. Green, lines 31-34)

Yeah, a lot of it was just learning from colleagues. I originally worked on the B-team and team colleagues would call a lot and they were very clear with parents too. (Mr. Peterson, lines 36-38).

My cooperating teacher, I learned a lot from her and I think she is amazing. She has a way of getting to know parents and then just if she knows that the parents hold the power, she uses that to hold over the students. (Ms. Regina, LSES, lines 62-64).

Teachers and student teachers shared many things in common. The difference between the two groups is mostly in the experiences gained from having already worked with students and parents compared to having mostly observed the work being done by cooperating teachers.

Comparison of teachers from high, middle and low SES schools

In comparing teachers and student teachers from high, middle and low SES middle schools, their need for support varied greatly. Teachers from all level of SES schools shared their lack of training to work with parents because the majority of universities, at least the universities that the participants had attended, still did not have

established training programs. The level of their fears and anxiety were high yet for

different reasons. In the high SES schools, the fear and anxiety mainly came from the

demands and expectations of the school and the parents while in the low SES schools, the

fears and anxiety came from the opposite spectrum of not being able to locate or connect

with parents. Their concerns also came from the lack of caring and support from parents.

> I think very few first year teachers are going to put themselves out there and start
>
> communicating with parents because it is kind of an uncomfortable thing to do for
>
> a lot of people and you are overwhelmed with plenty of other things on your plate.
>
> (Mrs. Green, lines 9-12).

> Many of them work the grave-yard shift or their phones are disconnected and if it
>
> is reconnected, you do not have the new number or the kid does not actually live
>
> there and they live over here and the parents, they see the number on their phone
>
> and they automatically assume, "I am not taking this phone call" or they will just
>
> hang up on you. (Mr. Ballwin, lines 66-70).

There were many similarities between high, middle and low SES teachers in the

categories of methods of learning, personal experiences, communication tools and

approaches as well as teachers' beliefs.   The only minor difference was in the category

of communication tools. As an example, almost all schools had and used the same

communication tools but teachers of both middle SES and low SES schools spent less

time in face-to-face conversations with parents than teachers of high SES schools due to

time constraints and teachers from high SES schools also had nearly three times the planning periods than the low SES schools. To compound the problem, the teachers in the low SES schools did not have common planning periods with each other, making the opportunity to plan and to discuss issues related to parents and students virtually impossible. The teachers from high SES schools not only had many more planning periods, they were also common planning periods with other teachers on their grade-level team and within their subject matter. The quote below was used in chapter four as data to support the support that teachers received from teaching teammates.

> I think mostly it has been peer sharing and during team, we work very closely together as a team and we respond to parents often as a team and we share our parent correspondence on our team and if I am sending an email to one of my parents, I always copy one of my teammates and sometimes I will consult with a teammate before I send anything out with the wording to see what they see and see if it is a common issue. (Mr. Matthews, lines 57-61).

> Even if we could just have the team time where we can talk about kids or if the kid was having issues that would be great, if we can have the parents in and all of the kids' teachers could be there, may be I would say, "He/she is doing a great job in my class but for some reason, he/she is having a hard time in social studies." (Mr. Donaldson, lines 234-237).

Another aspect that differs for teachers from high, middle and low SES schools is the amount of resources for teachers to work with parents. As an example, in the high

SES schools, there was one counselor in every grade level but in low SES schools, there was typically one counselor for the whole middle school (all three grades). Part of the quote below was used in chapter four as data to show the support of counselors towards teachers.

> Yes, we have two 6th grade teams and there is a counselor that is designed to our team, that might not be right but we definitely have a 6th grade counselor that covers our team specifically. She will share information as necessary and we will share with her as we see things come up and that is a really good working relationship. (Mr. Matthews, lines 78-81).

> No, no doubt, when you mentioned about talking to the counselor once a week, that was so awesome. (Mr. Donaldson, lines 226-227).

One aspect that high, middle and low SES teachers did have in common was the usage of online grade programs. Teachers from each SES school discussed the use of online grades as a way of keeping parents informed. Though available, LSES parents do not seem to utilize the program in the same frequency or at all in comparison to HSES and MSES parents A few teachers further discussed some of the additional functions of the online grade programs that proved to be useful to them in their communication with parents. One example of such a function is the ability to send assignments reminders to a mass group by email. All teachers who shared about these programs found them to be a

positive contribution in their communication with parents. This was reinforced by positive responses from parents.

> We use infinite campus for online grades and the biggest hurdle that we have is getting parents to learn how to use it and to use it every week. We have parents who do 3-4 times a day and some who do not even know it exists even though we education them about it and the kids know how to use it. It's almost like no news is good news so we print off a copy and send it home. It shows you assignments, tests, and citizenship and there are explanations as to why we did or did not get something. The program has all of those options. (Mrs. Darcy, lines 189-194)

> In general, we believe Infinite campus (online grades program) has really made a difference and parents were constantly getting emails back and forth justifying or clarifying things. (Mrs. Long, lines 148-150)

Comparison of participants who are parents versus who are not

In the category of personal experiences, ten of 18 teachers and three of nine student teachers were parents. Within the participants who were parents, only two of 10 teachers and all three student teachers became parents prior to joining the teaching profession. Each of them stated that their knowledge in working with parents strongly came from their own parenting experiences. They talked about the advantages of having been parents years before teaching and one of the advantages is already knowing what teachers wanted and needed from parents as well as understanding how parents felt.

I am a career changer and this is my 9th year of teaching as a teacher and I was

student teaching for a year. My kids were older and my oldest was actually

entering 6th grade when I started. That was really interesting experience to have

but not in this district but to have a 6th grader and also be teaching 6th grade.

Obviously she was my oldest and I have gone through this 3 times and they had

great transitions 3 times. That experience has tremendously impacted my empathy

for parents and I have had all three of my kids are different and two of my

children are in the gifted program and one of my children was diagnosed with a

learning disability in ADHD relatively late much to my dismay (…..) relatively

late in her academic life so I have had pretty wide ranges of experiences with

schools and all three of them have done fine but it has not always been easy so I

think that it has shaped my approach with parents. (Mr. Matthews, lines 87-97).

I was a mama bear and I understand that we are talking about your baby and we

are talking about somebody that you love and nurture and a lot of teachers think

you are talking about the curriculum. They are not even speaking the same

language. (Mrs. Paul, lines 55-58).

I have to say, as a parent of a 20 year old and an 18-year-old, 99.99% of what I

learned about what to do with parents as a teacher, I learned as a parent. There

were things that did not work well for me as a parent and getting newsletters from

my children's elementary teacher, that was great- I LOVED THEM!! I need to

remember to do that when it is my turn. All of the other things about parent communication, there was a huge, huge amount that I missed in terms of communication with teachers. What I learned from that experience was what I needed to do and what I should do way differently when I become a teacher. (Mrs. Jill, HSES, lines 65-72).

Although there was not a distinct difference in the effectiveness between teachers who are parents and who are not, there was an unmistakable difference between teachers who became parents prior to teaching in comparison to teachers who became parents after they started teaching. Seemingly, having parenting experiences before teaching experiences gave teachers significant advantages because the learning came from one of the most personal yet powerful experiences in life.

Comparison of older teachers versus younger teachers (in age)

The biggest disparity between older and younger teachers is experience. For most, it was the experience of working with parents but for some, there was also disparity in life experiences, which naturally occurs due to difference in age. In the communication tools category, nearly all teachers were provided with the same types of tools such as emails, telephone, website/internet, face-to-face conversations, newsletters and other miscellaneous tools like online grade programs. Teachers shared how they utilized various tools to suit their communication purposes. This is a commonality among all of the teachers. Even though this pattern is not exclusively or absolutely true with all participants, the older teachers seemed to favor phone calls and face-to-face conversations while the younger teachers tended to make use of technology tools such as websites and emails. Having said that, the main drive in their effectiveness came from

the wisdom in the balance usage of communication tool in respect to the expectations of the school and the parents. As quoted before, Dr. Stevenson explained:

I keep reminding teachers, pick up the phone and do not rely too heavily on emails and emails are great but when there is a situation that is not too great. But just as I say that, the power of talking with someone is so much greater than an impersonal email that is being sent. (Dr. Stevenson, lines 121-124).

I have gotten some parents this year who will email me right away and I will email them back and we chat through email and I have seen that this year but that was kind of looked at negatively and that has bummed me out because I was all about email and our principal is more of an old fashion guy and he likes it if we talk to the parents one on one instead of emailing and it is just the times because he has been a principal for over 25 years and he was teaching for a while before that so I think he just does not realize that some people are just better with email and that's what I try to talk to him about and he says he understands but at the same time he wants me to talk to the parent because he insist that emails can be looked at in two different ways based on the way they are read. I personally have not used email as much as I would like to but other people that I work with, I am not sure. Even kids email me constantly with assignments and same thing with people that I work with because we are constantly emailing each other and we wish our principal would see that and value that form of communication so I have

kind of gone away from it but it is one of those things that I think is really

effective. (Mr. Smith, lines 210-224)

Although older and younger teachers differ in their preference of communication

tools, they all valued the learning and support from each other while they worked with

parents. Teachers of all ages learned by reading and giving input to each other's emails

and they exchanged thoughts about parents and students during team meetings. Having

said that, much of the time, older teachers tended to have the mentoring role while

younger teachers tended to have the role of receiving guidance. They also supported each

other by splitting up the quantity of work with parents of 80-130 students and when

challenging situations surfaced, teachers met as a team with upset parents so they could

present a united front and give each other backing.

> We had a parent who recently came up to school and thought our science teacher
> was out to get her son and so she came up and she was really livid. So she
> requested a one on one with the teacher. Our team talked it over and we decided
> that we needed to do this together. We do not want the teacher to be thrown
> under the bus. When she called to confirm, we told her that the whole team
> would be there. (Mr. Stanley, lines 148-153).

The age difference of the teachers mainly showed in their choices of

communication tools. The choices seemed to differ between personal and technological.

However, they also demonstrated a commonality of working together and supporting

each other in their work with parents. These are the patterns found from the results of chapter four. Beyond comparing the results within the study, the results will also be linked back to the literature review in chapter two for the purpose of relating this study to the existing literature under the topic of parental involvement.

Discussion related to the literature

The overarching reason for teachers and parents to have an effective working relationship is the direct and positive impact on student achievement (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood & Weinfeld, 1966; Henderson, 1988; Larocque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011). In chapter two's literature review, there were some connections that can be made from the literature to this study. The discussion relating back to the literature will be by categories.

Amount of training

Traditionally, teachers (both pre-service and in-service) have been vastly under trained to work with parents, as is well documented in previous research studies. Hinz, Clarke & Nathan (1992) found that only one out of 27 universities in the state of Minnesota that offered a K-12 education degree had one course in parental involvement. Radcliffe, Malone and Nathan (1994) studied the requirements for all 50 states and found that no state actually required a course in parental involvement for certification. Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider and Lopez (1997) studied education program in 22 states and found that only nine out of 60 education program even had one course in parental involvement. Tichenor (1997) states that 80% of student teachers and beginning teachers felt a need for an educational course in the area of parental involvement. In 1998,

Chavkins and Williams conducted a research study of the southwest region universities and found only 4-15% of the universities had a single course that is designed to train pre-service teachers on how to work with parents. Only 37% of the professors taught at least one class period on the topic and those took place mostly in special education or early childhood classes.

According to Broussard (2000), teacher education programs continue to lack course work in the area of working with parents. Over a period of eight years, there were numerous research studies conducted to find out the state of training teachers to work with parents and none of the studies found any major change occurring in the training programs among universities in the United States. In contrast, Epstein (2005) conducted a research study in 37 states with 500 universities and she claimed that among the universities in this study, 60% had at least one course and 90% had classes that covered that topic of parental involvement in some format. Darvin (2012), noted that novice teachers needed multi-dimensional professional development including opportunities to practice. The content of the interviews from this study also indicated that in-service professional development is severely lacking.

In this study, only one out of 18 teachers and one out of nine student teachers reported having a formal course of training in the area of working with parents. This is consistent with the assessment that the general trend of lacking course work at the university level continues. The need for improvement in the area of training teachers to work with parents is critical because according to Katz and Bauch (1999), teachers who have had pre-service training not only felt much more comfortable with family involvement, they also reached more families. In addition, this study also confirmed the

findings from Israeli researchers Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008) claimed that although teachers were in favor of parental involvement, they were also vulnerable and fearful of the increased influence of parents and the scrutiny of their work. The findings of this overseas study parallel the findings from studies in the United States (Markow & Martin, 2005).

Methods of learning to work with parents

Since teacher do not receive adequate training to work with parents, they are compelled to find other methods to acquire skills in this area. In this study, it was found that teachers main methods of learning are mentoring, observation and trial and error. Literature review found no research studies that directly discussed the learning of teachers to work with parents in the form of mentorship and observations. However, Sindelar, Daunic & Rennells (2004) and Flanigan (2005) stated that traditionally, in university teacher preparation programs, there is little or even no training in working with parents. Therefore, many teachers learn to work with parents mostly by the "live and learn" experiences and many teachers are self-taught on the job when it comes to working with parents. This confirmed the findings in this study in regarding the high number of teachers who felt like much of their learning came from trial and error.

Personal experiences

This researcher's literature review found no publications that discussed the impact of personal experiences on the working relationship between parents and teachers.

Communication tools

In this study, it was found that almost all teachers had access to the same types of communication tools. There was not a specific tool that was found to be more effective

than another, rather, it was matching the tools to the specific purpose of the communication and knowing when to use which tool. As report in the review of literature on communication tools, Upham, Cheney and Manning (1998) found teachers felt it was best to have face-to-face conversation with parents. Both parents and teachers cited lack of time as an issue but for different reasons because the time commitment for parents is related personal responsibilities while time commitment for teachers was a work related responsibility. With the availability of internet usage in public schools, Bouffard (2008) conducted a similar research study on using technology to enhance family/school communication. The findings had some similarities to Schumacher's 2008 study where more high SES families used electronic communication; internet communication enhanced student achievement; about 1/3 of the families frequently used internet communication while 2/3 used it infrequently; students of all backgrounds benefitted from internet communication; internet communication was used when children were not having academic issues. The overall conclusion is that internet communication is helpful but still largely under utilized yet it is linked to student achievement. In this study, results show that both parents and teachers had mixed feelings about face-to-face conversations, phone calls and internet communication. However, the use of internet/electronic communication tools such as emails, online grades and teacher websites seems to have enhanced the overall communication process between teachers and parents.

On the other hand, Thompson (2008) performed a study on parent/teacher e-mail communication. Purposeful sampling was used to collect information-rich e-mails. Characteristics of parent/teacher e-mail were analyzed. Findings include: grades were

discussed at length in their communication; at all grade levels, teachers communicated frequently with a handful of parents via e-mail; teachers initiated e-mail communication but sometimes parents would do so for their own reasons; students, in general, liked parents and teachers' communication via e-mail; both parents and teachers report that e-mails help some students improve their grades. However, the findings in Thompson's study do not indicate that the use of e-mail drastically increased parent/teacher communication. White-collar parents are more likely to use this electronic format of communication than blue-collar parents because of internet access. Although the content of emails was not the focus of the study, there were two patterns noted about the email content of effective teachers and that patterns have been noted in chapter four (p.173). Finally, one participant teacher discussed at length about the popularity of the smart phone an how the internet access gap between white and blue collared families seemed to be narrowing.

Approaches to communication

Although teachers and parents both tend to claim that firm, mutually beneficial partnerships (or collaboration) between them are essential to children's learning, healthy development, and success in school (Lawson, 2003), the communication between teachers and parents tended to be negative. A new trend of positive communication seems to be materializing at least within the teachers who are effective in working with parents. In this study, ten of 18 teachers repeatedly emphasized the importance of using positive communication to begin a working relationship with parents. They continued to discuss the importance of not only having positive communication as a foundation but also as an on-going theme in their work with parents. Even when the teachers had the

occasional need to report negative news, the positive connection that was already in place changed the dynamics of the response and support from the parents. Since most negative communication started from disruptive choices and behaviors at school, connections between home and school may be particularly relevant for children with behavior problems as relationships between parents and teachers may be strained by those negative exchanges. Since high quality relationships between parents and teachers can enhance children's social and emotional functioning (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999) and it will allow teachers a greater opportunity to communicate positively rather than negatively.

Teachers' beliefs

In the area of teachers' beliefs, results of this study only linked to the literature on efficacy. According to Bandura (1997), parents are more likely to become involved if they perceived that teachers either expect or require their participation. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) also suggested three conditions for parental involvement, which includes development of a parental role in education, a positive sense of efficacy to help their children and parents' perception of opportunities to be involved. In this study, it was found that some teachers believe in being proactive with parents, believe that working with parents is part of their professional responsibility and parents/teachers have a shared responsibility in a child's education. Regardless of wording, these studies seemed to support each other's claims that teachers' positive sense of efficacy impacted their working relationship with parents in a positive way.

Supports

As described in chapter two, support for teachers to work with parents seems to have stemmed mostly from administrators. According to Ganser (2001) and Protheroe (2001), administrators are the catalyst to the working relationship between parents and teachers. The nature of the leadership role comes with the authority to provide support and yet in reality, administrators were not only under-trained as former teachers but also as current administrators (Radcliffe, Malone & Nathan, 1994, Farkas, 2003, Hess & Kelly, 2007). The solution for this concern is not yet clear in the literature and it was not the focus of this research study. On the other hand, support from follow teachers,

The lack of time and the high teacher-to-student ratio in middle school

It is a well-documented fact that middle school and high school teachers face the challenge of typically working with over 100 families of students (Chrispeels, 1991; Jaksec, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Halsey, 2004). In this study, even though teachers did not always directly implicate time as an issue, ten out of 18 teachers did. Nearly all of the teachers who taught at LSES schools reported that time was even a bigger issue as stated earlier in this chapter on page 224 as well as chapter two (p.35). Providing teachers with preparation periods requires the expense of hiring additional staff, mostly elective teachers, and since poorer school districts often lack funds to do this, it is logical that teachers who teach at poorer schools tend to struggle; with the time that it takes to work with parents. Indeed time is not the only factor that causes the struggle, however, it is one of the main ones in the Low SES schools. As an example, within this study, the teachers from HSES middle schools often had at least 3 preparation periods and they usually had common planning periods with colleagues of the same team,

same grade level and same subject. Conversely, the teachers who teach in the LSES

middle schools were trying to work with just one planning period. At the very least, this

indicated 3 times the difference in the amount of time allotted to work with parents and

that was the main difference between the types of SES schools. Given that there are no

common planning periods and also having fewer school counselors, LSES teachers

having fewer human resources to support their efforts in working with parents. Time is

definitely a resource that can be added or removed from the ability to adjust the number

of staff in a school; the resource of money has direct impact on the time that is afforded

to each teacher at every school district. Upham, Cheney & Manning (1998) and Miretzky

(2004) clearly documented the lack of time to work with parents, in comparison to

elementary teachers, due to the high teacher to student ratio in middle school.

Quality standards

As discussed in chapter three on methodology, all qualitative studies are judged

by standards for quality with parameters that ensure objectivity, reliability, internal

validity, external validity and application as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994,

p.277).

Objectivity

Objectivity refers to neutrality, minimal bias and replicability. A record of

methodology and the actual sequence of the data collection in this study were outlined in

detail in chapter 3. The researcher is aware of her personal bias in terms of her own

passions for working with parents, for her desire to provide better training for the next

generation of teachers, of her own culture, background and education as well as her drive

to improve the education process for all middle school students. Furthermore, the conclusions from similar studies have been discussed in the preceding section of this chapter as they relate to the findings from this study. Finally, the research study will be accessible on the Proquest system.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of the process of the study. In this study, the semi-structured and the focus group interview questions were both written for the purpose of answering the research question on the steps of learning to work with parents as a middle school teacher. The methodology of this study was designed to answer the research question about the steps of learning to work with parents for middle school teachers. The specific questions used for the semi-structured and focus group interviews were stated in a manner to draw out the process of learning from each participant. The parameters were set by the limitations and delimitations that are stated in this chapter as well as chapter one. Finally, this researcher's committee of professors, editors and peer readers reviewed the content numerous times throughout the study.

Internal validity

Internal validity refers to the credibility of the findings from the study. Credibility can be established by plausibility for readers from the connections made with previous research studies in the literature as discussed in this chapter. Data from teachers and student teachers were triangulated for the conclusion. There is internal coherence of the findings because of the similar experiences of both teachers and student teachers, at least from the beginning of their teaching careers; yet there are various uncertain areas such as the effectiveness of teachers who were parents in comparison to those who were

not parents in their working relationship with parents, which will lead to further studies

and considerations. Although some of the factors that impacted the path of learning for

teachers were clear, the depth of the impact was not.

External validity

External validity refers to the ability to transfer the conclusion of a study to other

contexts. In this study, participants were not only given a general description as a group

but they were also described as individuals with their own unique distinction from others.

This will permit other researchers to compare the sample of this study with others. In

terms of generalizability, the scope and the boundaries of the study allows generalization

from the study for all teachers in terms of learning to work with parents effectively even

though the study was focused on middle school teachers. However, since the study was

limited to public schools with parents from all walks of life, it is not appropriate to be

generalized with studies that include private and/or charter schools. As for readers of the

study, readers who are teachers will find consistency with their own experiences because

almost no teachers were trained to work with parents regardless of certification, grade

level, subject, age or gender. Finally, the replication of findings in other databases was

established both in the chapter two's literature review as well as the discussion relating to

literature section in this chapter.

Application

Application refers to whether the results of studies help people to be more aware

and empower them to corrective actions for the under-served, the benefits and harm to

others, the accessibility of the findings and the level of usability of the findings to

actually help solve problems. In this study, the purpose was to gain knowledge about the

steps on the path of learning to work with parents for middle school teachers. The results

of the study were intended to help people (teachers, university professors, school

administrators and professional development directors) to be more aware and empower

them to find a systematic way to improve the training of teachers to work with parents in

the future. This study hopes to benefit the next generation of teachers by the

improvement of training programs at the university level as well as current in-service

teachers with the provision of professional development in the area of working with

parents.   In addition, it is the hope and intent of the researcher to create courses with

appropriate content (based on the participants' input) to provide a systematic way to

improve the training of teachers. Furthermore, the researcher anticipates future studies

from the findings because the literature in the area of training teachers to work with

parents continues to be very limited and is in need of further action. The accessibility of

the findings will be easy because the study will be available on the Proquest system.

Limitations

According Creswell (1994) and others, both qualitative and quantitative studies

inherently have limitations in their design. This researcher recognizes the limitations in

this study's design and deemed them negligible for the purpose of the research study.

As a first limitation, data collected from both semi-structured and focus group

interviews have an inherent bias based on the experiences of those being interviewed and

the preconceived understanding of the interviewer. Both the researcher and the

participants went into the interviews with preconceived ideas, personal and professional

experiences that influenced the way in which each person asked or answered questions.

The researcher attempted to minimize the impact of both researcher and participants' bias by providing open-ended questions as the framework for the interviews.

As a second limitation, no administrators, parents, counselors or students were included. The decision to not include the group stated above was based on the size of the study, and the nature of a basic qualitative study with characteristics of grounded theory as grounded theory seeks to collect data from the field expert rather than the sideline contributors.

As a third limitation, the teachers and student teachers of this study were only interviewed in person but they were never observed in their work with parents. No video or audio recordings were made of interactions between the participating teachers and parents. It would have been valuable to witness the teachers' effectiveness in action rather than just question and answer format.

As a fourth limitation, elementary and secondary teachers were excluded and participants were limited to only middle school teachers because middle school is the first major change in the work between teachers and parents and is therefore, a unique aspect in the area of working with parents. It was appropriate to only include middle school teachers.

As a fifth limitation, special education teachers were not included because the needs of parents of special needs students are very different than the typical parent, therefore, were not appropriate to include in this study.

As a sixth limitation, only public school teachers were included in the study. Teachers from private and charter schools were not included because of the selective processes of the schools; the parent population is vastly different than public schools.

Therefore, including the experiences of private and charter school teachers would have added a factor that clouded the results of this study.

The last limitation, the researcher did not include deans of college of education in any university, district professional development directors or heads of education seminars. Therefore, none of the materials or policies for the provision of training for teachers to work with parents was included.

Recommendations for further research

It is clear that from the literature review that the amount of research in the area of parental involvement is abundant yet much of it is focused on elementary schools, general school involvement in terms of parents' physical time in the school and general support. The central issues in parent involvement such as negative communication, trust and the lack of clarity in roles for both parents and teachers still need to be study. Studies that are specifically focused in middle school in the area of parental involvement, regardless of particular topical studies, are minimal in comparison to elementary school or even high school. In the area of parental involvement, specific studies of training teachers to work, at any schooling level, with parents is virtually non-existent. Moreover, even though there are some clear factors under the umbrella of why parental involvement is a continued struggle in the United States, there is much to be learned about how to resolve some of the negative contributing factors such as distrust or the distinct phenomenon of negative communication between teachers and parents.

This study explored a gap in the literature related to the learning path of middle school teachers who are effective in their working relationship with parents. Based on

the results and the limitations of this study, the following recommendations for future research studies are offered as possible ways to continue to fill this literature gap:

1. Even though this study began to answer of some the questions regarding training teachers to work effectively with parents, the appropriate amount of training, the specific type of training and the timing of the training require further studies.

2. The measurement of the level of effectiveness in working with parents warrants further studies in the depth of impact in some of the categories from this study such as personal experiences or teacher beliefs in order to further evaluate the dimensions of the impact.

3. Although the methods of learning to work with parents on the job were identified, the specific amount and frequency of mentoring, the quality of the relationship between mentor and mentee, the types and frequency of observations all require further studies.

4. Since the issue of the training teachers to work with parents stemmed from the lack of such training, it is recommended that studies be conducted for the purpose of finding the factors that keep the training to work with parents from being offered and taught at the university teacher education program for the pre-service teachers. After all, the lack of having this type of training is the root of the issue.

5. Similarly, it is recommended that studies conducted for the purpose of finding the factors that keep professional development on the topic of working with parents from being offered at school districts throughout

the country.

6. The process of establishing trust between teachers and parents, as stated in chapter two (p.52-53), require additional studies to further investigated how trust is established and how can both parents and teachers positive contribute to that process.

7. The need for time for teachers to work with parents has been clearly indicated throughout the study, further research is needed to find out how to balance and improve teacher/student ratio and teachers' scheduled time to work with parents in middle school and perhaps in high school as well.

8. The improvement of the working relationship between teachers and parents is needed yet the responsible structure such as the federal and state government, universities and school districts have yet to respond in any significant way. Therefore, studies are needed to see what must happen in order to change the structure.

9. The Sanders (2008) study alluded to the concept of parent liaisons but little is known about this potential solution to the working relationship between parents and teachers and additional study is suggested.

10. Mentoring is an important component of learning to work with parents. Some school district have experimented with mentors who are paid to work one-on-one with new teachers yet little research has been to establish the value of this investment which warrants more studies.

11. Personal experiences impact how teachers work with parents yet there is

virtually no specific research on this topic and therefore, should be study.

12. There has been some research on the content of effective emails between teachers and parents and also teachers and students yet the usage of email has been established as improving the relationship between parents and the also student achievement so this topic deserves some additional research.

13. Since administrators are the catalyst for the working relationship between parents and teachers, their responsibility towards this component of the job needs additional research.

14. Since parental involvement is positively linked to student achievement, a study of highly successful students, regardless of race, family SES level, types of school, gender and grade levels is needed to find out what are the common factors of all successful students.

In addition, the following recommendations for future changes in practice and/or policies (for both K-12 schools, school districts, universities and state department of education) are offered as possible ways to improve teachers' working relationship with parents.

1. School district administrators need to take the lead in offering professional development for teachers in the area of working with parents. All school districts have policies on professional developments and it is up to the district administrators to take a lead and offer

appropriate support for teachers to learn how to work more effectively

with parents as district administrators are the ones who allocate time

and budget to professional development as well as institute policies on

what teachers are required to do.

2.   Individual states department of education need to evaluate their current

requirements for both pre-service teachers and in-service teachers. For

pre-service teachers, the state departments need to change the

requirements for certification that would include a minimum number of

credit hours in training for the purpose of learning how to work with

parents, regardless of the grade and subject certification. Ideally, some

of the required credit hours should be fulfilled in the field so that pre-

service teachers can have some hands on experiences with parents prior

to student teachers, which is traditionally the last semester of the

education degree. For in-service teachers, the state departments need to

change the requirements for re-newel of certification, transfer of

certification and offer incentives for the life-time certification teachers

that would include a minimum number of hours in training either in

graduate studies or district sponsored professional development or

workshop based professional development in the area of working with

parents.

3.   A set of similar requirements (stated above) as teachers should be

added, by the state department of education for school administrators.

4.   Universities need to begin to pilot and/or offer course work in the area

of training pre-service teachers to prepare them to work with parents. The specific course(s) should require both in class and in field experiences in their learning.

5. Both the state department of education as well as the universities should assess basic knowledge in the area of working with parents just as they do with subject and grade level certifications.

6. Both school district and building administrators need to make available time, space and personnel for student observers and student teachers to have opportunities to specifically learn from teachers who are particularly effective in the area of working with parents.

7. Both school district and building administrators as well as university professors need to make opportunities available for pre-service and in-service teachers to share their best practices in the area of working with parents. As an example, one or more session of professional development, faculty meeting or class period in course work can be devoted to sharing ideas and good examples of working with parents. Examples can include copies of newsletters, well-written emails, videos of teacher/parent conferences…etc.

8. Federal regulations, state department of education requirements, school district policies can all be made to requirement training time in the area of working with parents that are supported by required funding such as 1-3% of district budget must be spent on parent/teacher relationships and related areas.

9.   Policy makers at all level can and should re-evaluate the time allocation of middle and high school teachers in their schedule for working with parents. As an example, with 80-130 student contacts per teacher, even one minute of outreach to each student's family would require around 1-2 hours.

10.   District administrators need to allocate money and position in the district for designated staff to oversee the area of working with parents in their schools.

11.   School districts should regularly (at least annually) survey parents on how to improve school practice, including how the school and the teachers can better work with parents.

12.   School districts should offer training for parents on how they can be work with parents for the purpose of not only school and home relations but also the improvement of student achievement.

Conclusion

Education improvement is no doubt a highly complex and often controversial issue in America. Society and education environments have both changed significantly in the past few decades yet parents continue to demand and desire the best in education for their children. However, teacher training has remained mostly unchanged. On the other hand, parental involvement in schools has been directly linked to positive student achievement but parents continue to be an often ignored but most significant resource for educational support.   The catalyst to true parental involvement begins with building an

effective one-on-one working relationship between teachers and parents. This is particularly true for middle school parent/teacher relationships. In this study, teachers who are highly effective in their working relationship with parents confirmed that teachers receive little to no training in the area of working with parents and they end up relying on their personal experiences and inconsistent opportunities to learn on the job. In order to improve education in America, we must address the two foundational groups of support (parents and teachers) in order to move forward. Although there is rich research in the area of all school parental involvement, there is much to be learned about the specific one-on-one working relationship between teachers and parents, in particular, middle school. This study hopes to open ideas and channel for further research on how to better train both teachers and parents to work with one another for previous studies have already shown the positive correlation between student achievement and parental involvement. I would encourage the federal government, department of education at the state level, universities, school districts, individual schools, professors, administrators, teachers and anyone who has a part in making a change in the working relationship between teachers and parents to support further research and change in practice.

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Appendix A: Introduction letter for semi-structured interviews teachers

Dear (Teacher A),   Date

My name is Karen Leong and I am doctoral student at the University of Missouri, St. Louis. My advisor is Dr. Kathleen Sullivan Brown. I am also a fellow middle school teacher at Wydown Middle School in Clayton School District.

Currently, I am conducting a research study on the topic of building an effective one-on-one working relationship between middle school teachers and parents: what are the steps of learning? Examining the path of knowledge of middle school teachers who are highly effective. For that purpose, I am recruiting middle school teachers who are regarded as highly effective in the area of working with parents by their building principals. You are such a teacher and your administrator decidedly recommended you.

I am requesting that you allow me to conduct a semi-structured interview. The interview will take approximately 1-1.25 hours. The interviews will likely take place within 1-2 weeks of contacting you. I will travel to a mutually agreed location that would allow us the privacy for the interview. You may choose to withdraw at any point without penalty and you also have aright to not answer any questions. Upon the completion of the interview, you will be provided with a copy of the transcript of each interview for your review at a later time as well as a small stipend in the form of a gift card for your time.

Attached is form of consent that you will need to sign in order to be a part of this process. Please be assured that all precautions will be taken to ensure confidentiality for your privacy. Please contact me at either Karencheungleong@gmail.com or 314-324-7208 if you wish to participate in this valuable study or if you simply have some questions before you make that decision. Please know that it is my intent that your contribution towards this study will aid in developing course work for pre-service teachers in order to better prepare the next generation of teachers to work with parents.

Thank you in advance for your time and attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Karen C. Leong, M. Ed.

Appendix B: Introduction letter to focus group interview student teachers

Dear (Student teacher A),   Date

My name is Karen Leong and I am doctoral student at the University of Missouri, St. Louis. My adviser is Dr. Kathleen Sullivan Brown. I am also a middle school teacher at Wydown Middle School in Clayton School District.

Currently, I am conducting a research study on the topic of building an effective one-on-one working relationship between middle school teachers and parents: what are the steps of learning? Examining the path of knowledge of middle school teachers who are highly effective. For that purpose, I am recruiting middle school student teachers to form a focus group for phase two of the study.

I am requesting that you would allow me to include you in this focus group. We will meet one time only at a mutually agreed date and time for approximately 1-2 hours. This focus group will take place after work during dinnertime and dinner will be provided. You may withdraw at any point of the research without penalty and you have the right to not answer any questions.

Attached is form of consent that you will need to sign in order to be a part of this process. You will also need to fill out the information form so I can assign you to the appropriate focus group. Please be assured that all precautions will be taken to ensure confidentiality for your privacy. Please contact me at either Karencheungleong@gmail.com or 314-324-7208 if you wish to participate in this valuable study or if you simply have some questions before you make that decision. Please know that it is my intent that your contribution towards this study will aid in developing course work for pre-service teachers in order to better prepare the next generation of teachers to work with parents.

Thank you in advance for your time and attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Karen C. Leong, M. Ed.

Appendix C: Teacher demographic information

Teacher information form:

1. Gender: Male _____   Female _____

2. Ethnicity: _____

3. Grade(s) taught: 6th _____   7th _____   8th _____   Others: _____

4. Age: 21-30_____   31-40_____   41-50_____   51-60_____   Older_____

5. Subject(s) taught:

   _____

6. Number of years taught: 0-5 _____   6-15 _____   16-25 _____   26 or more _____

7. Education level: Bachelor's degree _____   Master's degree _____

   Doctoral degree _____   Other degree _____

8. Certification(s):

   _____

   _____

9. What category of school do you teach at:

   Suburban _____ Urban _____   Hi_____ Med _____ Low_____ SES

10. What is the enrollment of your school (number of students):

   0-200 _____   201-400 _____   401-600 _____   601-800 _____   801-1000_____

11. Are you a parent?   Yes _____   No _____

12. Which SES background would you consider your own? Hi ____ Mid ____ Low___

Researcher's notes:

Teacher _____ = _____

School _____ = _____

Appendix D: Student teacher demographic information

Teacher information form:

1. Gender: Male _____   Female _____

2. Ethnicity: _____

3. Grade(s) taught: 6th _____   7th _____   8th _____   Others: _____

4. Age: 21-30_____   31-40_____   41-50_____   51-60_____   Older_____

5. Subject(s) taught:

    _____

6. Education level: Bachelor's degree _____   Master's degree _____

    Doctoral degree _____   Other degree _____

7. Certification(s):

    _____

    _____

8. What category of school do you student teach at:

    Suburban _____ Urban _____   Hi_____ Med _____ Low_____   SES

9. What is the enrollment of your school (number of students):

    0-200 _____   201-400 _____   401-600 _____   601-800 _____   801-1000_____

10. Are you a parent?   Yes _____   No _____

11. Which SES background would you consider your own? Hi _____ Mid _____ Low____

Researcher's notes:

Teacher _____ = _____

School _____ = _____

APPENDIX E: Semi-structured interview questions for teachers

Interview questions:

1. What factors may have influenced your development in working with parents?
   Explain.

2. Have you experienced any major transformations in your life experiences,
   education or job in the area of working with parents? Explain.

3. By what process did you develop your effectiveness in working with parents?

4. If other teachers want to develop in the area of working with parents, what
   suggestions would you offer to them? Please cite actual examples from your own
   experiences in your explanation.

5. Any final thoughts before we conclude this interview?

APPENDIX F: Focus group questions

Focus group questions:

1. Tell me what specific skills/lessons did you learn about working with parents in your student teaching assignment experience?

2. Share with me about your preparation in working with parents from your university course work or field experiences prior to your student teaching assignment.

3. What else do you think would have been helpful to you in terms of working with parents and why?

4. If you could change anything about your experiences (course work, requirements, field-experiences, observations, student teaching…etc.), which would make you feel more prepared to work with parents, what would you change? What would you keep the same? Why or why not?

5. What are your final thoughts (round robin sharing)?

Appendix G: Introduction letter to building administrator

Dear (Principal A), 							Date

   My name is Karen Leong and I am doctoral student at the University of Missouri, St. Louis. My advisor is Dr. Kathleen Sullivan Brown. I am also a fellow middle school teacher at Wydown Middle School in Clayton School District.

   Currently, I am conducting a research study on the topic of building an effective one-on-one working relationship between middle school teachers and parents: what are the steps of learning? Examining the path of knowledge of middle school teachers who are highly effective. For that purpose, I am recruiting middle school teachers who are regarded as highly effective in the area of working with parents. I am asking for your help in recommending teacher(s) in your building who are best in establishing an effective working relationship with parents.

   I am requesting approximately one hour of each teacher's time with the interview. Each teacher will be provided with a copy of the transcript to ensure the accuracy of the interview. In addition, each teacher will also be provided with a new name and a created name for your school for the confidentiality of both the teacher and your school. Finally, each teacher will be given a small stipend for his/her time.

   Attached is sample form of consent that your teacher(s) will need to sign in order to be a part of this process. Please contact me at either Karencheungleong@gmail.com or 314-324-7208 if you wish to participate in this valuable study by recommending one or some of your teachers or if you simply have some questions before you make that decision. Please know that it is my intent that your contribution towards this study will aid in developing course work for pre-service teachers in order to better prepare the next generation of teachers to work with parents.

   Thank you in advance for your time and attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Karen C. Leong, M. Ed.

Division of Educational Leadership

One University Blvd.
St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499
Telephone: 314-516-5900
PI telephone: 314-324-7208
E-mail: Karencheungleong@gmail.com

Appendix H: Consent form for semi-structured interview participants

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities
Training pre-service middle school teachers to work effectively with parents: What are the components of the training program-Perspectives from highly effective middle school teachers

Participant _____   HSC Approval Number
_____

Principal Investigator: Karen C. Leong   PI's Phone Number: 314-324-7208

_____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Karen C. Leong of the College of Education, department of educational leadership at the University of Missouri, St. Louis and Dr. Kathleen Brown. The purpose of this research is to find the components that should be included in training programs for middle school teachers in the area of working with parents.

2. a) Your participation will involve:
in a one-hour semi-structured interview. The location will be mutually agreed between the principle investigator and the participant. The interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed. The identity of the participant will be confidential. Within two weeks of the interview, the principle investigator will provide the participant with a copy of the transcript of the interview for member check and any necessary follow up questions.

Approximately eighteen participants may be involved in this research.

b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be 60-90 minutes for each semi-structured interview.

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.

a) Participants will be given a small stipend for his/her time. If the interview takes place at a location, such as a café, the principle investigator will be responsible for the cost of the food and drinks.

b) Data and the newly gained knowledge from the study will be shared with participants for their own
   learning.

5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. By agreeing to participate, you understand and agree that your data may be shared with other researchers and educators in the form of presentations and/or publications. In all cases, your identity will not be revealed. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection). That agency would be required to maintain the confidentiality of your data. In addition, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked office. All data will be destroyed at the end of the study (estimated to be December, 2013).

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Karen C. Leong @ 314-324-7208 or the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Kathleen Brown @ 314-516-5788. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research Administration, at 516-5897.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date   Participant's Printed Name

                                        Karen C. Leong
_____   _____
Signature of Investigator or Designee   Date   Investigator/Designee Printed Name

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Appendix I: Consent form for focus group interview participants

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities
Training pre-service middle school teachers to work effectively with parents: What are the components of the training program-Perspectives from highly effective middle school teachers

Participant _____   HSC Approval Number
_____

Principal Investigator: Karen C. Leong   PI's Phone Number: 314-324-7208

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1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Karen C. Leong of the College of Education, department of educational leadership at the University of Missouri, St. Louis and Dr. Kathleen Brown.   The purpose of this research is to find the components that should be included in training programs for middle school teachers in the area of working with parents.

2. a) Your participation will involve:

Three focus groups will be established for this research study. Each focus group interview will be composed of *six to ten* middle school pre-service student teachers from various local universities. Prior to participation, each participant will be asked to fill out two forms. One, a consent form for participation and two, an information sheet that is meant to collect demographic information from each middle school student teacher. Each participant will be asked to gather documents that are relevant to their working relationship with parents to bring and share with the researcher and the group as part of the focus group interview data collection. Prior to bringing the documents, all names of students, families and schools will be removed.

Approximately twenty-four participants may be involved in this research.

b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be 60-90 minutes.

4.
3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.

4. a) Participants will be provided a meal for their time.

b) Data and the newly gained knowledge from the study will be shared with participants for their own learning.

5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. By agreeing to participate, you understand and agree that your data may be shared with other researchers and educators in the form of presentations and/or publications. In all cases, your identity will not be revealed. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection). That agency would be required to maintain the confidentiality of your data. In addition, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked office. All data will be destroyed at the end of the study (estimated to be December, 2013).

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Karen C. Leong @ 314-324-7208 or the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Kathleen Brown @ 314-516-5788. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research Administration, at 516-5897.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

| Participant's Signature | Date | Participant's Printed Name |

Karen C. Leong

| Signature of Investigator or Designee | Date | Investigator/Designee Printed Name |

Appendix J: Introduction letter to university student teaching program directors

Dear (University Student Teacher Program Director A),   Date

My name is Karen Leong and I am doctoral student at the University of Missouri, St. Louis. My advisor is Dr. Kathleen Sullivan Brown. I am also a middle school teacher at Wydown Middle School in Clayton School District.

Currently, I am conducting a research study on the topic of building an effective one-on-one working relationship between middle school teachers and parents: what are the steps of learning? Examining the path of knowledge of middle school teachers who are highly effective. For that purpose, I am recruiting middle school student teachers whom are either currently participating or just recently completely their student teaching assignment. I am asking for permission as well as for your help in recommending student teachers in your program who are interested in participating in this research study.

I am requesting approximately one to two hours of each teacher's time to participant in a focus group interview with other middle school student teachers from various universities. Each teacher will also be provided with a new name and a created name for your university for the confidentiality of the student teachers, their participating schools and your university. Finally, each teacher will be provided with food and drinks for his/her time.

Attached is sample form of consent that your teacher(s) will need to sign in order to be a part of this process. Please contact me at either Karencheungleong@gmail.com or 314-324-7208 if you wish to participate in this valuable study by recommending one or some of your student teachers or if you simply have some questions before you make that decision. Please know that it is my intent that your contribution towards this study will aid in developing course work for pre-service teachers in order to better prepare the next generation of teachers to work with parents.

Thank you in advance for your time and attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Karen C. Leong, M. Ed.

Appendix K: Eight major categories, sub-categories, properties and dimensions

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORIES	PROPERTIES	DIMENSIONS
Amount of training	Training for pre-service teachers	Amount of training	From no training to formal coursework
		Emotional reactions to the amount of training	From feeling fear and anxiety to relief and confidence
	Training for in-service teachers	Amount of training	From no training to formal /purposeful professional development
		Emotional reactions to the amount of training	From feeling fear and anxiety to relief and confidence

CATEGORY	SUB-CATERGORIES	PROPERTIES	DIMENSIONS
Methods of learning	Mentoring	Groups of mentors	Administrators and teachers
		Depth of learning	From none to significant
		Frequency of learning	From none to frequent and regular
		Degree of success with parents	From failure to effective
	Observation	Groups of colleagues to observe	Administrators and teachers
		Depth of learning	From none to significant
		Frequency of the learning	From none to frequent and regular
		Degree of success with parents	From failure to effective
	Trial and error	Depth of learning	From none to significant
		Degree of success with parents	From failure to effective
		Frequency of learning	From none to frequent and regular

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORIES	PROPERTIES	DIMENSIONS
Personal experience	Being a parent	The circumstances of being a parent	Being a parents prior to becoming a teacher and being a parent of special needs children
		Amount of impact on the work with parents	From none to significant
		Depth of learning	From none to significant
	Other jobs	Types of jobs	Customer service related jobs and jobs that work with children
		Amount of impact on the work with parents	From none to significant
		Depth of learning	From none to significant
	Childhood experiences	Amount of impact on the work with parents	From none to significant
		Depth of learning	From none to significant
	Circumstances of friends and family	Amount of impact on the work with parents	From none to significant
		Depth of learning	From none to significant

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORIES	PROPERTIES	DIMENSIONS
Communication tools	Phone calls	Degree of effectiveness in comparison to the purpose	From not effective to most effective
		Timing	From immediately to delayed for days
		Frequency	From never to regularly
	Emails	Degree of effectiveness in comparison to the purpose	From not effective to most effective
		Timing	From immediately to delayed for days
		Frequency	From never to regularly
	Website/internet	Degree of effectiveness in comparison to the purpose	From not effective to most effective
		Timing	From immediately to delayed for days
		Frequency	From never to regularly
	Face-to-face meetings	Degree of effectiveness in comparison to the purpose	From not effective to most effective
		Timing	From immediately to delayed for days
		Frequency	From never to regularly
	Other tools	Type of tools	Newsletters, expectation sheets, face book page and handwritten notes
		Timing	From immediately to delayed for days
		Frequency	From never to regularly
	Preferred tool of teachers	Age of teachers	From 20's to 60's

CATEGORY	SUB CATEGORIES	PROPERTIES	DIMENSIONS
Approaches to communication	Positive communication	Frequency of usage	From never to regularly
		Awareness of importance	From weak to strong
		Degree of effectiveness in connecting with parents	From not effective to most effective
	Mix use of tools	Frequency of usage	From never to regular
		Awareness of importance	From weak to strong
		Degree of effectiveness in connecting with parents	From not effective to most effective
	Listening and asking for help	Frequency of usage	From never to regular
		Awareness of importance	From weak to strong
		Degree of effectiveness in connecting with parents	From not effective to most effective

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORIES	PROPERTIES	DIMENSIONS
Teachers' beliefs	General beliefs	The degree of ownership to the belief	From no ownership to fully owned
		Source of the belief	Personal and/or professional
	Being proactive	The degree of ownership to the belief	From no ownership to fully owned
		Source of the belief	Personal and/or professional
	Professional responsibility	The degree of ownership to the belief	From no ownership to fully owned
		Source of the belief	Personal and/or professional
	Shared responsibility	The degree of ownership to the belief	From no ownership to fully owned
		Source of the belief	Personal and/or professional
	Resource provider	The degree of ownership to the belief	From no ownership to fully owned
		Source of the belief	Personal and/or professional

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORIES	PROPERTIES	DIMENSIONS
Support for teachers	Administrator	Level of need	From optional to absolutely necessary
		Level of impact of this specific support on teachers personal needs	From superficial/informational to internal/personal
		Frequency of contact	From none to regularly
	Teachers	Level of need	From optional to absolutely necessary
		Level of impact of this specific support on teachers personal needs	From superficial/informational to internal/personal
		Frequency of contact	From none to regularly
	Counselors	Level of need	From optional to absolutely necessary
		Level of impact of this specific support on teachers personal needs	From superficial/informational to internal/personal
		Frequency of contact	From none to regularly
	Parents	Level of need	From optional to absolutely necessary
		Level of impact of this specific support on teachers personal needs	From superficial/informational to internal/personal
		Frequency of contact	From none to regularly
	Others	Type of support	Time and translators
		Level of need	From optional to absolutely necessary
		Frequency of usage	From none to regularly

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORIES	PROPERTIES	DIMENSIONS
Suggestions for future training	Samples and examples	Degree of usefulness for learning as perceived by teachers	From not useful at all to very useful
	Panels	Degree of usefulness for learning as perceived by teachers	From not useful at all to very useful
	Scenarios	Degree of usefulness for learning as perceived by teachers	From not useful at all to very useful
	Actual experiences	Degree of usefulness for learning as perceived by teachers	From not useful at all to very useful
	School year calendar	Degree of usefulness for learning as perceived by teachers	From not useful at all to very useful
	Modeling	Degree of usefulness for learning as perceived by teachers	From not useful at all to very useful
	Reframing from assumptions	Degree of usefulness for learning as perceived by teachers	From not useful at all to very useful
	Mentoring	Degree of usefulness for learning as perceived by teachers	From not useful at all to very useful
	Others	Degree of usefulness for learning as perceived by teachers	From not useful at all to very useful