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Leadership Practices that Support Parental Involvement in One High Needs Elementary School

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Doctor of Education, in the College of Education and Human Development, Georgia State
University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as
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LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN ONE HIGHT NEEDS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by

BRETT SAVAGE

Under the Direction of Dr. Jami Royal Berry

Abstract

Research has continually supported the idea that increased levels of parental involvement in educational settings have a positive effect on student outcomes across racial, socioeconomic, and cultural lines. Despite the clear connection between parental involvement and student success high needs schools, defined as having high percentage of students living in poverty and/or having a high percentage of non-native language speakers, have not been able to sustain the significant levels of involvement that lead to higher achievement. The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership qualities exhibited in a high-needs urban elementary school that had actively involved parents and was experiencing success with regards to student achievement on state-mandated standardized tests. The elementary school examined had an active parent center as well as a high number of students living in poverty. Furthermore, over half of the population was categorized as coming from non-English speaking families. A case study methodology was employed in order to understand the leadership qualities and practices of the principal, assistant principals, teachers, and parent center coordinators that lead to high levels of parental involvement. An understanding of the leadership qualities and their strategies that

promoted social justice was gained through the analysis of semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with these leaders and select school personnel. The knowledge and understanding gained in this study provided insight into what attributes and qualities are possessed by school leaders that effectively involve parents and students in the quest to promote student personal growth and academic achievement.

INDEX WORDS: Parental involvement, Leadership, High needs schools, Social justice

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN ONE

HIGHT NEEDS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by

BRETT SAVAGE

A Dissertation

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in

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the College of Education and Human Development

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my loving, patient wife, Adriana, and to my spirited daughters,

Ava, Anna Kate, and Brooklyn. May we always work hard, have fun, and love each other.

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I begin by thanking my wife of thirteen years, Adriana. She works hard every day supporting students with special needs while remarkably fulfilling the roles of wife and mother. Without her support along the way I would have never been able to finish this journey. And yes, sweetheart, I am finally done.

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I would also like to thank my parents, Scott and Kendra Savage. While we live far away, the lessons you taught me are always near. I will never be able to thank you enough for the sacrifices you made for me. The costs you willingly paid to support my education allowed me to develop my love of learning and build a vision to help others have that same love. Dad, your daily example of discipline and consistency built a foundation in my character which I believe allowed me to finish this work. Thank you both for your unconditional love; you truly are the best Mom and Dad in the world.

And last, I want to thank my friends from Cohort III. It has been an interesting journey and I will always be proud to say that we made it together. Good luck!

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CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING AND NAVIGATING BARRIERS TO PARENTAL

INVOLVEMENT IN HIGH NEEDS SCHOOLS

Increased levels of parental involvement resulted in positive growth for student learning, reduced discipline issues, and improved attendance rates (Hill & Craft, 2003; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2013; Sheridan et al., 2012). These benefits have been shown to be effective across social classes, socio-economic status, and race (He, 2016; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). While this is not a new phenomenon, high-needs schools still struggle initiating and maintaining impactful levels of parental involvement (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011). High-needs schools for the purpose of this study are defined as schools having a high percentage of students from families with incomes below the poverty line and/or a high percentage of non-native language speaking students. Poverty was chosen to define a school as being high needs because students attending high-poverty schools are less likely than their more affluent peers to have highly trained and experienced teachers, and therefore their quality of education suffers (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Gabriel, Muasya, Mwangi, Mukhungulu, & Ewoi, 2016).

Parents in high-poverty schools have disproportionately low levels of traditionally defined involvement and lack access and financial resources when compared to affluent schools (Smith et al., 2011; Gordon & Cui, 2014; Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Having a high percentage of non-native language speakers was chosen as a criteria for being considered a high-needs school because the communicative barriers inherent in these schools have a negative impact on student outcomes (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Bower & Griffin, 2011). Students from families of non-native language speakers also experience lower parental involvement, which is often due

to the low educational levels of their parents or due to their parents not understanding how to be involved (Tinkler, 2002; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). Due to the high needs makeup of the school being examined in this study, the literature review focused on research that investigated challenges faced by students from Spanish-speaking families.

The spectrum of the obstacles facing high-needs schools is undoubtedly broad. Therefore recognizing and understanding these obstacles is essential if positive progress is to be realized. Positive relationships between parental involvement and educational outcomes have been established, yet high-needs schools still need help in both determining the needs of their parents and implementing appropriate programs to effectively engage them (Epstein et al., 2002). In a recent study of a broad range of parents, the researchers reported that parental involvement succeeds through the parent-teacher organization in place at that school (Institute of Education Sciences, 2015). Unfortunately, this mode of involvement was one in which parents of high-needs schools were less likely to be involved (Gordon & Cui, 2014). In order to address the problem of low parental involvement, an understanding of the multiple ways that schools can facilitate this involvement is essential (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Epstein et. al (2009) propose there are six types of involvement strategies that schools can employ to maximize parental involvement which included: (a) parenting – helping with parenting skills and increasing understanding of student developmental needs; (b) communicating – actively and clearly communicating information about school programs and opportunities; (c) volunteering – providing and improving opportunities for parents to be directly involved in school activities and programs; (d) learning at home – involving families in their students' learning at home through homework or other curriculum-based activities; (e) decision making – creating structures and organizations that increase parents' input into school decisions; and (f) collaborating with the

community – schools coordinating community-level resources for families and students. When these strategies are understood and employed by schools, there is potential for families to be involved in their children's education on multiple fronts (Jeynes, 2011; Auerbach, 2007). Determining which of these involvement strategies will best serve the students at a particular school starts with understanding the barriers that parents in these high-needs schools face.

Guiding Questions

The major question of this research study was: How does an urban high-needs elementary school facilitate meaningful parental involvement?

The following questions guided the research:

> 1 What are characteristics of parental involvement programs that make them successful in facilitating and increasing parental involvement?
>
> 2 How do these efforts to increase parental involvement impact student outcomes?
>
> 3 What are the school leaders' roles in facilitating parental involvement?

Barriers to parental involvement.

There are ways in which parents can be involved in their students' education beyond volunteering in the school and classroom. This is an especially important point to consider when examining high-needs schools as volunteering is one of their most under-utilized strategies of involvement (Tinkler, 2002). Schools regularly recognize and praise parents who are directly involved in volunteering at the school and those who are actively involved in school classrooms and community councils (Jeynes, 2005). However, volunteering was only one of six ways for parents to impact student performance in high-needs schools, and it may not be the most effective way to help students (Sawyer, 2015). The way that parental involvement was engaged was different from family to family and from school to school (Sawyer, 2015). It is important to

understand that when interviewed separately, the educational goals of parents in high-needs schools tend to mirror those of teachers (Alameda-Lawson, Lawson, & Lawson, 2010). Unfortunately, due to cultural differences in how involvement is viewed, teachers can see these parents as being apathetic (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006). Parents in our high-needs schools overwhelmingly desire to be involved in, and care about their students' education (Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Facilitating parental involvement in culturally-diverse, high-needs schools may require different approaches from school leaders than those employed by leaders in more affluent schools due to the significant challenges that these parents face. It is important that school leaders in high needs schools understand the range of external contexts that may act as barriers to parental involvement in their schools. This critical reflection is needed in order for culturally responsive strategies to be developed so that parents are motivated and welcomed in (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2016).

Review

Poverty as a barrier.

Poverty is a common barrier to parental involvement in high-needs schools (Gordon & Cui, 2014, Bartel, 2010). In their research Hill and Craft (2003) found that living in low socioeconomic conditions has a greater impact on parental involvement than does race or cultural differences. One inhibitory factor facing parents living in poverty is that they tend to have less flexible work schedules than their suburban, more affluent counterparts (Christianakis, 2011, p. 173; Bryan & Williams, 2013). Parents with lower socio-economic status are more likely to work longer hours, have multiple jobs, and be the heads of single-parent homes (Bryan & Williams, 2013). These factors lead to parents not being able to participate in events and opportunities that occur during the school day or during times when parents with more traditional

work schedules are typically available to participate (He, 2016; Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Students whose parents work these non-traditional work schedules frequently have other adults living with them who may also contribute to their educational experience (Glueck & Reschly, 2014). Glueck and Reschly (2014) assert that with regards to high-needs schools the term *parent* can mean anyone in the student's life that supports their education. Teachers and school staff can mistake this lack of on-site participation, or volunteerism, by biological parents as parental indifference (LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). While the desire to participate may be present, many parents in high-needs schools may have "competing factors such as employment issues, whereby they may have hourly jobs with inadequate health insurance and other benefits, thus not allowing them to participate in the amount and in the ways that their counterparts who have more stable employment can" (LaRocque, et al., 2011, p. 116). Parents with these generally low-paying jobs are less likely to be able to prioritize involvement above their more pressing and immediate needs (Weinshenker, 2015).

Parents living in poverty can also have their direct involvement limited by the fact that they lack some of the basic requirements for participation (Williams & Sanchez, 2013; Gabriel et al., 2016). Transportation is an example of one of these requirements that may not be available due to the costs involved. Parents who do not have personal means of transportation, or who have to pay for public transportation to and from the school, are less likely to have high levels of participation (Drummond & Stipek, 2004).

Even though non-traditional work schedules and challenges associated with transportation may afford less opportunity for parental participation and involvement, parents in high-needs schools still desire to be involved in their students' educational lives, even if that means participating in different ways (DeMoss & Vaughn, 2000; Brown & Beckett, 2007).

While parents in high-needs schools desire to be involved, their limited successes and experiences in schools may require that they be more directly guided towards opportunities for involvement (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011). While this desire exists, without guidance, it may not always translate into actual involvement. Brown and Beckett (2007) found that overall involvement significantly decreases as socio-economic status decreases and direct parent volunteerism follows that same trend.

Students living in poverty may realize a multitude of benefits from an increased level of direct parental involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Craft, 2003; Tinkler, 2002). It is important to note that while poverty is frequently thought of as a barrier that schools must overcome; parents living in these situations may be the source of diverse experiences and perspectives that a school and their leaders and teachers may desperately need (Edwards & Kutaka, 2015). Increasing parental involvement has been shown to increase academic performance for all types of students while also improving the academic and emotional functioning of adolescents (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2013).

While socio-economic barriers do impact parental involvement of all races and ethnicities, minority students suffer disproportionately lower levels of parental involvement (Auerbach, 2007). While the overall percentage of children living in poverty in America has decreased since 2010, little has changed for the percentage of African-American children living in poverty over that same time period (Patton & Krogstad, 2015). "Black children were almost four times as likely as white or Asian children to be living in poverty in 2013, and significantly more likely than Hispanic children" (Patton & Krogstad, 2015, p. 1). This high rate of poverty among this group of minority students acts as stumbling block for creating positive home-to-school relationships.

School populations in the United States are growing more culturally, racially, and economically diverse (LaRocque et al., 2011; Gordon & Cui, 2014). While the school involvement of racially diverse, poor parents, is limited, it is not necessarily non-existent (Sheridan et al., 2012-4). DeMoss and Vaughn (2000) found inner-city African American parents to be more likely to have a greater variation in their types of parental involvement than their white counterparts. Their involvement with students tended to be more heavily weighted towards at-home rather than at-school participation (Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Moreover, low-income parents in urban areas are often extremely concerned about their children's schooling, but due to cultural differences, lack the ability to get involved (Orozco, 2008, p. 32). The disparity among cultures can manifest itself in many ways. LaRocque, Kleiman, and Darling (2011) note:

> Differences among cultural groups are varied and range from minimal differences—such as differences in accepted distance for personal space—to more complex issues—such as perceptions of authority figures or outlook on what is considered sharing behaviors. (p. 116)

This lack of understanding has been found to especially be true for African-American, Hispanic, and low-income families (Barton, Drake, Perez, St Louis, & George, 2004). Schools that recognize that cultural differences will impact the ways in which parents become involved in their students' education have the potential to recognize, value, and further encourage more positive involvement (Alameda-Lawson et al., 2010; Brown & Beckett, 2007). Cultural and economic barriers present real challenges for school leaders fighting to increase parental involvement and ultimately student learning.

Language as a barrier.

Schools in the US are facing great challenges as they become more culturally and linguistically diverse (Garcia & Jensen, 2010). Linguistically-diverse students are targeted not only because of their growing number, but also because their achievement has lagged, particularly those students whose primary home language is Spanish (Garcia & Jensen, 2010). Language has long been a major stumbling block with regards to parental involvement, particularly for Latinos (Morales-Thomas, 2015). Latino students are the largest and fastest growing group of English language learners and could, by some estimates, represent over 50% of the total school population by the year 2050 (Planty et al., 2009; Fry & Gonzalez, 2008; Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015). The largest and fastest growing subgroup in the United States is young Hispanic children ages 0-8 (Garcia & Jensen, 2010). Language, along with poverty, has been a barrier to academic achievement for this group of students who have long had low scores on national assessments (Planty et al., 2009). For many of these Spanish-speaking students, English is not the primary language spoken in their homes, and often not spoken at all by their parents. This not only creates more challenges for student achievement, but also makes it more difficult for parents of these students to be active participants in their students' education.

These parents are less likely than their English-speaking counterparts to participate without specific programs designed to increase their involvement (Bartel, 2010). Schools that actively engage non-English speaking parents in school-based programs have the potential to see positive gains in student achievement that without parental involvement may not be realized (Tang, Dearing, & Weiss, 2012; De Gaetano, 2007). Schools across America now focus on providing a meaningful and appropriate educational experience for linguistically diverse students based upon these findings.

According to Hernandez et. al (2009) the language skills of parents have a significant impact on language acquisition in their children. Therefore, students without fluent English-speaking parents in their home will be those at greatest risk of falling behind their peers academically at an early age. Intervention should occur early in students' schooling, beginning in pre-K and continuing through their early elementary years, and should include parents as much as possible (Tang, Dearing, & Weiss, 2012). Zurcher (2016) concludes that involving parents in the writing process with their children can markedly improve their writing growth. Including parents is a key step in the intervention process for these Spanish-speaking students. Unfortunately, unfamiliarity with the many structures in place in American schools can prevent meaningful inclusion of non-English speaking parents (Morales-Thomas, 2015; Barton et al., 2004).

Families in which Spanish is the primary language, especially those that have lower English proficiency, often feel intimidated by traditional school structures (Orozco, 2008; Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Much of the fear experienced by these parents stems simply from not understanding the expectations of these unfamiliar schools (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001). In his work with low-income Spanish-speaking immigrant families, Orozco (2008) found that they are willing to work extremely hard to support their students' educational needs when teachers initiate a parent-teacher connection. However, teachers in high-needs schools who lack the ability to communicate in the native languages of parents may not initiate contact due to a lack of funding for translators (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). This language barrier continues to make teacher-parent communication a barrier to involvement.

Prioritizing parental involvement for non-English-speaking parents has potential benefits for students, as Latino families traditionally bring cultural strengths that support education. For

example, Latino families tend to value education, have strong familial ties, and have high academic aspirations and expectations for their children (Tang et al., 2012; Orozco, 2008; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001). Hill and Taylor (2004) found that even when they have trouble participating in school-based opportunities, Latino parents frequently work on academics with their children at home.

Many Latino parents believe that their role as parents is to provide the basic living necessities and to teach their kids good manners and positive moral values (Valdes, 1996). More often than not the expectation in American schools is that parents play an active role in the educational process both at school and at home. Unfortunately, some Latino parents do not share this view (Tinkler, 2002). The disconnect in expectation and values can make the home-to-school relationship difficult to navigate for these Latino parents and teachers.

At-home involvement from Latino families can go unnoticed by teachers. O'Donnell and Kirkner (2014) note: "Cultural differences may result in Latinos being involved more in the home than on school campuses, resulting in their contributions being overlooked by school staff" (p. 213). However, this involvement should not be overlooked as it has potential to be an effective form of parental involvement for the benefit of the student (Epstein et al., 1997). Epstein et al. (2002) state that one of the six types of involvement for building school-family-community partnerships is learning at home. The authors explain that deliberate planning in order to involve parents in learning activities at home, such as homework and other curriculum-based activities, can result in many positive outcomes for students, parents, and teachers alike. Positive outcomes for the student include improvement in subject areas, having a positive attitude towards homework, self-confidence as a learner, and a changed view of their home as a place of learning that includes their parents as teachers (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). Positive

outcomes for the parent(s) involved include increased knowledge of and ability to help with content, an increased understanding of how to encourage and support the student, and a greater awareness of how their child learns. This type of parental involvement at home will benefit a teacher in a number of ways. Teachers would have the opportunity to create more varied, interactive types of homework. Teachers would also recognize that any type of parental involvement will help their work, as teachers gain in effectiveness with the family's involvement and support (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006). Involving parents in learning at home can yield positive outcomes, which can be especially beneficial for younger students struggling with language acquisition (Ijalba, 2015).

Ijalba (2015) found that students whose mothers worked with them in both their home language and in English benefited more significantly in English language acquisition than did students in the control group without the parental help in English. She also found that the group of parents who were encouraged to support their students in both their home language and in English became more involved in their children's overall literacy, as the parents participated more frequently in activities like reading to their children and providing books in Spanish. "It can be argued that early literacy in Spanish, the mothers' proficient language, turned the children's educational environment at home into an additive one, where the home language was valued" (Ijalba, 2015, p. 217). Recognizing and valuing the family's home language, along with emphasizing the importance of English acquisition, proved beneficial in motivating these parents to work on literacy skills with their children. Participation that includes all those involved with the child, including this at-home parental involvement, is important as a first step in providing the necessary support to young language learners (Cohen, Linker, & Stutts, 2006). While this involvement has great potential for benefit, even more impact could be made if schools find

ways to increase these families' involvement at the school rather than just the typical at home participation (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2013).

Cultivating at-home involvement can have benefit for English language learners, particularly those whose parents do not speak English. But this type of involvement is not the only potentially beneficial type of parental involvement, and may not even be the most effective. Having parents directly involved in school-based activities may have an even greater impact on student learning than at-home involvement (Tang et al., 2012). "Meta analyses and recent reviews of the literature indicate that the amount of family involvement in school-based activities is positively associated with child achievement; average affect sizes (r's) are between .2 and .3, which are larger and more likely to be positive than are effect sizes for home-based involvement" (Tang et al., p. 178).

Epstein et. al (2002) called this type of parental involvement volunteering. The authors describe this type of involvement as fostering parent volunteer and audience opportunities at the school in order to support the school and ultimately student learning. Just like at-home involvement, school-based volunteering has the potential to see benefits for students, parents, and teachers (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Teachers benefit from this type of involvement as they become aware of the talents and skills of parents. This awareness causes teachers to focus on more individualized instruction because they know the student will receive extra help from his or her parents. Another benefit is that parents better understand the teacher's job and gain confidence about their own ability take on the role of teacher to support their children (Mutch & Collins, 2012). At-school involvement provides ideas for them to use to support their children at home while potentially improving their own education (Epstein et al., 2009). Improving their own education and understanding could be invaluable for parents whose home language is not

English (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007). Of course, the most important positive impact of this type of involvement is made on the students (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Parental volunteering at school can increase a student's ability to communicate with adults, the opportunity to learn skills that the volunteers possess, and an increased awareness of occupations and contributions of parents and/or other volunteers (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Students may also have more individualized opportunities for learning as a result of parents volunteering at school (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Parent helpers in the class offer the teacher more opportunities to work individually or in small groups with their students. Having more personalized learning experiences and extra help in the classroom is the great benefit from having parent volunteers in the schools (Christianakis, 2011).

The benefits of parental involvement extend far beyond the direct contact and support that students receive as a result of parent volunteering. Parental involvement has been shown to increase students' positive feelings about learning, which increases their motivation to be successful in school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Parental involvement increases motivation and shows students that their parents value school and education (Hill & Taylor, 2004). An increase in students' positive feelings towards school has been found to be beneficial in increasing literacy performance, especially for students facing educational barriers like language acquisition (Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004; Tang et al., 2012; Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). The more that students feel positive about their schooling, the greater their chances of finding the motivation to fight through the barrier of English not being their first and home language. It is essential that teachers and school administrators realize these communication barriers, as these barriers have the potential to affect much more than just the parent-teacher relationship.

Hidden curriculum as a barrier.

According to Vang (2006), minority students and their parents who have limited English proficiency have communication difficulties and can therefore be treated differently than their peers. Even more detrimental than being treated differently is the idea that students from non-English speaking or poor backgrounds receive a different curriculum or educational experience. This different educational experience is known as the hidden curriculum (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Anyon, 1980; Vang, 2006). "Hidden curriculum is defined as instructional norms and values not openly acknowledged by teachers or school officials. The hidden curriculum is an underlying agenda that affects students of low socioeconomic status, particularly language-minority students" (Vang, 2006, p. 20).

Gordon, Bridglall and Meroe (2005) suggest that providing access to education is not enough for students with diverse backgrounds. They argue that without supplemental training, schools are unable to ensure high levels of academic development. Bowles and Gintis (2002) assert that students coming from different social classes or economic backgrounds are punished in school as they display behaviors and follow cultural norms that are in opposition to those understood and lived by their teachers. Often teachers in high-needs schools do not come from economic or cultural backgrounds similar to their students and therefore lack the understanding needed to accept these differences (Amatea, Cholewa, & Mixon, 2012).

In her recent research, Yoon (2016) explains that this gap is particularly wide when middle-class White women are the teachers in a diverse school. Her study found that middle-class White teachers may work from the view that their parenting is superior to that of the parents of students in high-poverty schools. This gap causes an unintended dehumanization of students in poverty and therefore reduces these teachers' ability to provide a truly equitable

educational learning experience. This lack of understanding can lead to a weak relationship with the parents and contribute to the creation of a hidden curriculum. If the parent's background and contribution is not valued, it creates watered-down effect. One of these outcomes stems from Anyon's (1980) observation that the same curriculum is actually approached differently depending on the socio-economic status of the students in the school. She found that affluent schools taught in a way that prepared students for professional careers, while working-class and poor schools offered a more "practical curriculum" (Anyon, 1980, p. 1). Students from affluent backgrounds participated in work that "involves individual thought and expressiveness, expansion and illustration of ideas, and choice of appropriate method and materials" (Anyon, 1980, p. 8). This difference, whether purposeful in their implementation or not, creates difficulties for students of diverse cultural and economic backgrounds to find the same levels of success as their more affluent peers. This may be one of the reasons why "parental economic status is passed on to children, in part, by means of unequal educational opportunity" (Bowles & Gintis, 2002, p. 1).

Since the parents of these culturally and economically diverse students do not know the rules of this hidden curriculum (Barton et al., 2004), meaningful and consistent involvement will likely be low (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). These parent's inability to effectively navigate the hidden curriculum, coupled with their lack of experience navigating school structures, create yet another barrier between these families and the school.

Lack of experience as a barrier.

Communication is an important part of promoting positive parental involvement (Walker, Ice, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011). This is true not only for individuals whose first language is not English, but also for those parents who did not attend an American school themselves or for

those who were not successful in their schooling experiences (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008).

Due to their lack of success in their schooling, parents in high-needs schools may not truly

understanding how to navigate the school environment in order to get involved. Williams and

Sanchez (2013) describe this major barrier to parental involvement in urban African-American

parents as having a "lack of awareness" (p.54) of involvement opportunities due to their lack of

successful educational experiences. Due to these unsuccessful experiences in education, some

African-American parents aren't aware of ways to get involved and may also have negative

perceptions about schools' attempts to facilitate their involvement (Hood & LoVette, 2002).

Hood and LoVette (2002) found that parents who were unsuccessful in their school experiences,

that is those who had less than a high school diploma, had significantly lower perceptions of the

school and their efforts to involve them than did those parents with higher educational levels.

Bartel (2010) found that this lack of success in previous educational settings drastically reduced

their ability to support their students in particular subjects and also hindered their involvement in

the school.

This lack of understanding of school dynamics is only being amplified as our schools

become more urban in America, and the size of our urban and metropolitan area schools

increases (Goldkind & Farmer, 2013). Administrators and teachers at large schools may

exaggerate the learning curve for parents who frequently lack and understanding of the American

educational culture, and therefore they can create environments that are less engaging for

students and their families. School context issues make being involved a challenge, especially in

urban schools. Understanding that parental participation and involvement in their students'

education may be different is the first step in encouraging the most meaningful and beneficial

types of involvement (DeMoss & Vaughn, 2000). Whitaker and Hoover-Dempsey (2013) found:

That some low-income and ethnic minority parents may have different ideas than higher-income and ethnic majority parents about the roles of parents and teachers in educating children. The social differences in parents' role construction, in addition to the interrelatedness of role construction with other motivators of involvement, suggest the importance of examining theoretical explanations of role construction in relation to social-contextual motivators of involvement. (p. 75)

Due to the great variation in methods of participation it is important that parents in high-needs schools not be viewed or treated as a homogenous group (LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). According to Sawyer (2015), methods of parental involvement vary from school to school, and are based on many things, including availability of time. African-American parents may not participate in traditional ways, for example volunteering, but often have indigenous resource skills that could be meaningful in student success. These indigenous resource skills can be defined as being the skills that already exist in the community that are naturally "helpful in the education of inner-city African American elementary school students" (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006, p. 7). Involving these parents, and employing their embedded skills, is one of the best ways to not only help students, but to help families as well (Jeynes, 2011). Being able to understand and recognize these available resources and skills already present in the community is key for a school in their outreach programs. These parental resources can be utilized as they continue to support students far beyond the boundaries of a given program (Christianakis, 2011).

Since cultural and contextual differences can manifest themselves during classroom interactions, they can put a strain on the very important parent-teacher relationship (LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). Although teachers do not always understand cultural differences, they have the potential to be an important link in creating meaningful learning for these

culturally diverse students. While these embedded indigenous skills often exist in high-needs communities, teacher lack of understanding of their existence and how to harness them can be a barrier.

Teacher readiness as a barrier.

Understanding the contexts present in high-needs schools and being able to effectively tailor practices around them is a skill that is often difficult to impart on pre-service and inexperienced teachers (Amatea et al., 2012). Teachers new to the profession possibly have little to no understanding of or experience working with students and parents of culturally diverse backgrounds (Nathans & Revelle, 2013; McKenna & Millen, 2013). These cultural differences are magnified in schools with great student diversity since most teachers in American schools are predominately white and are part of a middle class upbringing (Nieto, 2002). Schools in areas of high poverty and low English proficiency are seen as less desirable places to work. Experienced teachers often avoid these schools or, if they take a job there, transfer quickly when a position at a more desirable school becomes available (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2009).

These issues leave leaders in these high-needs schools regularly looking for qualified teachers to their fill vacancies. At times these open positions are filled by newly certified teachers with little or no experience (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). The majority of these newly certified teachers are college graduates and of different cultural background then the families and students at these schools (Amatea et al., 2012). This poses a challenge for the school leaders as they must prepare and train these teachers to understand and mitigate the challenges faced with regard to parental involvement (De Gaetano, 2007).

A challenge that these leaders face when preparing and training new staff is overcoming low self-efficacy of these teachers with regards to parental involvement strategies (Fisher &

Kostelitz, 2015). The new staff members' lack of experience and minimal training through

teacher-education programs leaves many inexperienced teachers willing, yet unsure of how to

involve parents. According to Garcia (2004), actual effective implementation of strategies that

bolster parent involvement is directly related to a teacher's self-efficacy. Since new teachers in

these schools often have few connections to families, consistent and specific training is needed to

avoid a possible barrier to involvement.

While it is important that teachers believe that they have the ability to connect with and

involve parents in high-needs schools, an understanding of their own ability to connect with and

involve parents is regularly not aligned with parent perception of that ability. This can be

particularly true when it comes to teachers who have recently completed a teacher preparatory

program (Garcia, 2004). Teacher preparatory programs do not always integrate site-based

practice in which teachers could gain this necessary experience. Collaborating with veteran

teachers could be invaluable for a new teacher's personal development and understanding of

barriers to parental involvement. Since these experiences are not commonplace, new and

inexperienced teachers continue to struggle connecting with parents in high-needs schools.

Amatea, Cholewa, and Mixon (2012) concluded, "many teacher education programs may

unintentionally reinforce the traditional hierarchical role expectation that teachers are the expert

authority and that low-income or ethnic minority caregivers implicitly are defined as deficient

when they do not meet the school's expectations" (p.802). Traditional ways of thinking only

widen the gap between these new teachers and the prospective parents. When considering the

lack of training or understanding provided in teacher preparation programs, it becomes even

more of a challenge for schools with a high number of new or inexperienced teachers.

Even in schools with veteran teachers and administrators, parent perception does not always align with school perception with regards to parental involvement opportunities and communications. Barnyak and McNelly (2009) noted, "Although teachers and administrators have strong beliefs about parent involvement and its importance in strengthening student achievement, what they practice in their schools and classrooms is not congruent with these beliefs" (p.33). Regardless of whether it is comprised of mostly new or veteran teachers, a school can embrace parental involvement as a positive avenue for reaching their students.

Successful navigation of barriers.

Much research suggests that parental involvement has positive effects on student outcomes and that there are multiple ways in which parents can be meaningfully involved (Epstein et al., 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Tang et al., 2012). It would be helpful to identify some school leaders who have seen positive outcomes due to their efforts to involve parents at high-needs schools. Whether implementing a program or adopting a new philosophy, school administrators who effectively involve parents have the potential to realize positive change on a number of levels.

In their study of three Chicago elementary schools serving a largely minority and poor population, Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman (2007) found that parents in these high-needs schools more regularly practiced two parental-involvement typologies: learning at home and parenting. According to the authors, leaders at these school found that students benefited when efforts were focused on both building the capacity of their parents and providing opportunities for at-home support and learning.

Building the capacity for these parents to effectively participate and support their children from home is a necessary step, as it allows parents who desire to be involved and opportunity to

learn how to do so (Okeke, 2014). In their research, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), found that parental involvement was often based on "general opportunities, invitations, and demands" (p.27) for their involvement. Building capacity of parents to help their students in high-needs schools could start with an assessment of each family's needs (Payne, 2008).

When attempting to build these parents' academic capacity, teachers and school leaders should be aware that many of these families do not have resources available that would make their involvement possible.

> For example, many students in households characterized by generational poverty have a very limited support system. If such a student isn't completing homework, telling that student's parent, who is working two jobs, to make sure the student does his or her homework isn't going to be effective. But if the school provides a time and place before school, after school, or during lunch for the student to complete homework, that intervention will be more successful. (Payne, 2008, p. 1)

The solution for this may include providing a parent or neighborhood center for parents to receive personalized training on how to structure and monitor homework and study time at home (Tinkler, 2002). However, in order for a parent center to be effective, it must be one that parents see as being accessible and staffed by those genuinely interested in their needs. The first step in facilitating a genuine outreach program or involvement center is to gather parent input regarding their wants and needs (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014).

It is important that teachers and school take the initiative to show that they care about communicating with parents in high-needs schools and then take innovative approaches based on feedback received from their community (Jensen, 2013).

Meaningful involvement is more likely to begin when parents in high-needs schools not only know about opportunities and avenues for participation, but also feel confident that teachers and school leaders desire their partnership (Bower, Bowen, & Powers, 2011). This culture of mutual respect between the school and parents is important, particularly in high-needs schools (Evans & Radina, 2014). Bower et al. (2011) continued by emphasizing in their findings that schools with greater family-faculty trust have parents who spend a greater amount of time at school, which ultimately leads to greater student successes. Since their research shows that a positive relationship exists between trust and parental involvement, the question now becomes: How does a school foster this positive trust? They first must start by evaluating their parental involvement programs to ensure that they are culturally relevant, responsive to the needs of the community, and target real needs (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). Having family involvement activities that target real needs and that show that the families' home cultures are a resource to be valued helps to improve parental perception of the school and makes parents more likely to engage in future opportunities (Ramirez, McCollough, & Diaz, 2016). This intentional focus on the needs of a school's families builds the trust that is so essential between families and schools.

Bower et al. (2011) highlight one school in their study which attempts to build this family-faculty trust by making what they call "home literacy bags" for the students in need. "Schools prepare backpacks for students to take home with all required materials and instructions for parent-child activities designed to address each child's specific learning needs" (Bower et al., 2011, p. 8). It is often these small opportunities, that when neglected, create a great divide between families and the school (Bower & Griffin, 2011). By providing learning opportunities, like these "home literacy bags," schools can begin to build this essential trust between families and the school.

Another example of a strategy employed by schools to build trust is highlighted in Savage's (2008) research of public schools. The author recommends that schools create a mission statement through which all work done by a parent center is channeled. "Parent services should be guided by a mission statement that reflects the institutional and departmental philosophy and vision for working with parents. Development of programs and services should evolve from the mission and vision to meet the purpose of the program" (Savage, 2008, p. 71). This focus helps makes clear to the parents that the school is trying to reach out to them and that time and effort is being put towards their inclusion. It also creates a sense that their time and participation is valued and that increasing their positive involvement and participation is a priority for school leadership (Bryan & Williams, 2013). By deciding, and then communicating that parental involvement is a priority, schools can gain a little more of that trust that makes meaningful parental involvement a possibility (Auerbach, 2009).

An excellent starting point is providing the framework for and developing the trust necessary to have these programs in place (Pomerantz & Monti, 2015). Unfortunately, practical hurdles such as conflicting work schedules and lack of transportation represent the problems to be solved. Suber (2012) found that many high-needs schools struggle to have meaningful participation in basic opportunities such as parent conferences. He found that successful high-needs schools were able to find innovative solutions to problems like these with parent conferences. "Offering incentives (e.g., a drawing for prizes) for attendance, as well as holding meetings at night, by phone, or in the family's home helped ensure participation" (Suber, 2012, p. 86). Seeing these challenges as opportunities for innovation rather than unmanageable obstacles has the potential to allow high-needs schools to reach parents who have historically had limited involvement.

Many high-needs schools work diligently to create the atmosphere and culture that promotes and encourages their parents to be active participants in their children's academic lives. School administrators and teachers can do many things, including but not limited to, creating parent centers for easy access, developing clear goals and intentions for their parent outreach, and creating and sustaining programs and ideas that foster mutual trust between families and schools. This trust has the potential to facilitate parental involvement with the ultimate end goal of improving and increasing student learning (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012).

Conclusion

Students whose parents are actively and directly involved in their education consistently have more positive outcomes than students whose parents are not (Sheridan et al., 2012; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2013; Bartel, 2010). Increasing student achievement and providing the best possible learning conditions for students, regardless of race, primary language, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, should be the paramount goal of school leaders, especially in high-needs schools. Identifying and understanding barriers that parents in high-needs schools face is essential if school leaders are going to effectively bridge these involvement gaps (Williams & Bryan, 2013). And these gaps are surmountable. With careful planning and examination of needs, these barriers can be overcome for the benefit of students. And when these barriers are overcome, the strengths of the parents will be able to form a base of support that students in high-needs schools need (Christianakis, 2011). Teachers and school administrators must not fear involvement, but must embrace it as an essential building block for student growth and success. High-needs schools will always have students who live with the challenges of poverty, language acquisition, and cultural diversity (Gordon & Cui, 2014). Only when schools address these barriers head-on will they find the opportunity to enable healthy and productive parental

involvement (Brown & Beckett, 2007). There are administrators and teachers who are finding

success as they work to create positive environments that encourage involvement from their

parents (Suber, 2012). We can highlight these examples, learn from their successes, and continue

to work tirelessly for the next generation of students.

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CHAPTER 2

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

IN ONE HIGH NEEDS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

The purpose of this study was to determine how an urban, high-needs elementary school overcomes the barriers related to parental involvement. The questions that guide this study are:

1. How do leaders in a high-needs elementary school overcome barriers to parental involvement?

2. Which leadership qualities possessed by school leaders impact the level of parental involvement in a high-needs school?

3. How do efforts to increase parental involvement impact student outcomes?

High levels of parental involvement result in positive outcomes for students including increases in achievement and attendance, and decreases in student disciplinary issues (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2013). These benefits of high levels of parental involvement are seen regardless of race, culture, and socio-economic status (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Unfortunately, levels of parental involvement have been shown to be directly related to the socio-economic status of the parents (Brown & Beckett, 2007). This leaves high-needs schools frequently in search of leaders and teachers who understand, and are willing to work through, the challenges faced by parents with regards to involvement.

For the purpose of this study, high-needs schools are defined as schools having over seventy percent of their students qualifying for subsidized lunch and/or having a high percentage of non-native language speaking students (Berry, 2008). Poverty was chosen to define a school as being high needs because students attending high-poverty schools are less likely than their more affluent peers to have highly trained and experienced teachers, and therefore their quality

of education suffers (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). Having a high percentage of non-native language speakers was chosen as a criteria for being considered a high-needs school because the communication barriers inherent in these schools have a negative impact on student outcomes (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Bower & Griffin, 2011). For this study the two criteria for school selection were poverty and non-native language speakers.

The school that was examined in this case study was a high-needs urban elementary school located in Georgia. This school was characterized as being a high-needs school since it had eighty-three percent of its students receiving free/reduced lunch thus the classification "living in poverty." Moreover, fifty-three percent of its students were classified as English language learners. Despite these challenges, students at this elementary school consistently performed above the state average on year-end standardized tests. Also, at the time of the study, this school had a very active parent center through which families were encouraged to participate in the education of their children.

Significance.

The results of this study are a resource for leaders of high-needs schools that seek to understand how to provide opportunities for parental involvement despite the barriers of poverty and language. There is a tremendous need to implement outreach programs that increase parental involvement in high-needs schools (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006). The school examined in this case study was a high-needs urban elementary school that had a successful parent outreach program in place for many years. Along with the qualities of the school leaders, the school's parent outreach program was examined. This information adds to the collective understanding of how these types of programs are created and maintained, as well as how they positively impact a school.

Theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework for this study was social justice leadership theory. According to Rawls (1999), social justice can be thought of as maintaining equal rights and liberties while distributing institutional resources and opportunities equitably. Social justice leadership then views this idea of social justice through the lens of the leader's role in guiding his or her school through transformation in order to benefit marginalized students or groups (Theoharis, 2007). This idea of social justice is particularly pertinent to the educational opportunities for students attending high-needs schools, as they often face inequalities in education that impact their achievement, such as low levels of parental involvement (Bell, Jones, & Johnson, 2002). Accounting for institutional or societal barriers, and then providing equitable access for all groups, is a hallmark of social justice theory (Crethar, Rivera, & Nash, 2008). By examining a school leader's role in enacting and ensuring needed change, social justice leadership theory becomes an appropriate lens through which this research can be conducted. This study researches the actions that can be taken by leaders of high-needs schools to provide an equitable educational opportunity for their students. It also aims to explore which leadership qualities of are most effective in sustaining and encouraging parental involvement in high-needs schools.

Methodology

There is ample research of the benefits that high levels of parental involvement have on student outcomes (Hill & Craft, 2003; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Sheridan et al., 2012; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2013). Research also identifies the barriers to parental involvement faced by high needs schools (Gordon & Cui, 2014; Hill & Craft, 2003). However, this research project examines a topic less explored in the literature, specifically, which aspects of school leadership

can effect parental involvement. This focus on school leadership guided the questions during the

interview stage of this project.

Guiding questions drove this qualitative research study. The following questions were crafted:

    1 What are characteristics of parental involvement programs that make them successful

        in facilitating and increasing parental involvement?

    2 How do these efforts to increase parental involvement impact student outcomes?

    3 What are the school leaders' roles in facilitating parental involvement?

    Qualitative research is designed to answer the "why's and how's of human behavior,

opinion, and experience – information that is difficult to obtain through more quantitatively

oriented methods of data collection" (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p.1). This approach to

research was appropriate for this study as the views, opinions, and understandings of the effects

of parental involvement at this specific school were gleaned from interviews of multiple

stakeholders.

    This dissertation, which utilized a single case study methodology, will be combined with

other case studies following the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN)

research protocol. This protocol was developed by a group of researchers participating in an

international study who aimed to determine what leadership qualities are critical in leading high-

needs schools. The overarching goal of the research was to provide a broader understanding of

the varying qualities of leadership essential for leading high-needs schools. This was a justifiable

approach as this school is one of unusual circumstances, being both high-needs and high

performing (Lam, 2014). Case studies such as this can be used when the results could potentially

contribute to knowledge of organizational phenomena (Yin, 2009). More specifically, Yin (2009)

asserts, "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in

depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p.18).

Case studies allow a researcher to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events. The researcher in a case study can be described as one who

> Typically observes the characteristics of an individual unit – a child, a clique, a class, a school or a community. The purpose of such observation is to probe deeply and to analyze intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalizations about the wider population to which that unit belongs. (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 116-117)

A case study was suitable in this instance because the school being studied achieved results with a population that does not historically score at the same level as those in more affluent areas (Lam, 2014). Moreover, the school's use of a parent-outreach center was not unique, as many schools have similar school structures or organizations that aim to increase parental involvement. Understanding what was effective about their efforts to involve parents could be meaningful for other high-needs schools. A single explanatory case study was beneficial in this instance because it allowed the researcher to have an in-depth look, through information gained from multiple interviews, at how this high needs school facilitates meaningful parental involvement for the benefit of their students.

The approach of the design was a constructivist epistemology. A constructivist approach uses the idea that people construct their knowledge and views based on their own personally interpreted experiences (Crotty, 1998). Multiple school stakeholders gave their perception of the impact of parental involvement. These views, emanating from school leader to participating parent, provided information from differently constructed points of view.

Site selection.

The school selected for this study (which was given the pseudonym "Saturn") was a high needs school located in an urban school district in Georgia. 83% percent of the school's 1135 students qualified for subsidized lunch and 53% spoke English as a second language. Both of these characteristics qualified Saturn Elementary School as high needs (Berry, 2008). While many schools meet the criteria for being high needs, Saturn Elementary School was selected for study because of its active parent center and its high achievement relative to other high needs schools. The school had invested heavily in what they called their parent center, in which they employed a parent outreach liaison and a parent instructional support coordinator. The school's achievement had been consistently one of the highest among high needs schools in their urban school district, particularly with regard to their scores on the Georgia Milestones Assessment System. This standardized test had been used by the state of Georgia for two years and Saturn Elementary School maintained their level of success for the 2015 and 2016 administrations of this end-of-the-year test. The school district in which they are a part has 29 schools with at least seventy percent of their students receiving subsidized lunch. Students from Saturn Elementary School consistently scored in the top quartile when comparing percent of students scoring in the proficient and distinguished range. This pattern of achievement held true for grades three through five, and across all subject areas for both spring 2015 and spring 2016 administrations. Setting parent involvement as a high priority and consistently having high achievement qualified Saturn Elementary for this case study.

School history.

Saturn Elementary School first opened its doors in August of 2004. The school was named after a fallen firefighter who had lived in the area and participated regularly in educating

local students about fire safety. The surviving family members were active in the school and regularly volunteered in the parent center. When the school opened in 2004, the surrounding area was experiencing a growth in its diversity. Saturn began to serve a diverse student body that represented forty-seven countries, and Saturn's students spoke twenty-seven different languages. This diversity mirrored the diverse cultural shift that was happening in the area in the early 2000s.

Saturn Elementary School was originally built to relieve two neighboring elementary schools, both of which had student populations beyond their capacity. According to one school leader, the school opened as the first Title I elementary school in their cluster of elementary schools. Saturn's appearance caused contention because it affected the redistricting process that determines attendance boundaries. Many families who had lived in the community for years refused to send their children to the school and opted instead to transport their children to the schools for which they were originally zoned. The current principal recalled an example of a story of that time period noting: "You know kids living across the street travelling fifteen minutes to [XXX] elementary school; so they didn't want to come to this school because they felt as though it had a certain stigma to it. The interesting thing about it is that the students always performed here. Always 96, 98 percentile. These kids were doing extraordinary things here." As the entire attendance area grew more diverse, and the successes of Saturn continued, fewer students opted to attend other schools.

At the time of study, the school had an enrollment of 1,155 students with the following demographic makeup: 53% Hispanic, 28% African American, 12% Asian, 5% Caucasian, and 1% identifying as multiracial. At Saturn 53% of the students were classified as English Language Learners (ELL) while 9% were served in some capacity in special education. Furthermore, 83 %

of Saturn's students received free or reduced lunch based on their family's economic status (see

figure 1).

For the 2015-2016 school year, Saturn scored slightly above 77 points on the Georgia

College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), the state's measure of school

effectiveness. This score was above the state line of regression with regards to percent of

students living in poverty. A total of twenty six elementary schools in their district have greater

than 75% of their students living in poverty. The average CCRPI score for that group of schools

was 74.2, which was just over three points lower than Saturn Elementary's score for that

particular year. The success on the CCRPI, the high standardized test scores, and the high levels

of parental involvement are the reasons Saturn Elementary School was selected for this case

study.

Student Demographic	Percentage
Asian	12%
Black	28%
Hispanic	53%
White	5%
Multiracial	1%
Special Education	9%
ESOL	53%
F/R Lunch	83%

Figure 1: Student Demographic Information

The school had students enrolled in kindergarten through 5th grade with 94 certified staff

members. The leadership team consisted of a principal and four assistant principals. In addition

to the direct leadership team, the school employed two people to run the parent center: the *parent*

instructional support coordinator and the *parent liaison*. Leadership was also distributed

throughout the building as each grade level had a grade chair. Teachers also fulfilled leadership

roles as they serve as content area, technology, and specialist leaders.

Since its opening in 2004, Saturn Elementary School has continued to grow in its diversity. One

of the assistant principals remarked, "we have definitely seen growth in all types of areas

including free and reduced lunch, our ESOL population, (and) special education population has

really risen quite a bit. So within those thirteen years there's definitely been some shifts."

Participants

Interviewee Position	Pseudonym	Date	Time	Length of interview (min)	Pages transcribed
Principal - Interview #1	Dr. Smith	8/1/16	9:45 AM	34	18
Assistant Principal 1	Mr. Perez	8/29/16	9:00 AM	24	11
Assistant Principal 2	Ms. Lopes	9/2/16	9:30 AM	20	10
Assistant Principal 3	Ms. Tills	9/30/16	10:30 AM	21	17
Principal - Interview #2	Dr. Smith	8/29/16	4:15 PM	22	11
Parent Support Coordinator	Ms. Clarke	9/2/16	8:45 AM	17	6
Parent Outreach Liaison	Ms. Duncan	9/27/16	1:35 PM	12	12
Teacher #1	Ms. Callahan	10/11/16	2:30 PM	16	19
Teacher #2	Ms. Rainey	10/13/16	7:30 AM	11	15
Teacher #3	Ms. Meredith	10/14/16	7:00 AM	14	19
Teacher #4	Ms. Krane	10/14/16	7:30 AM	15	17

Figure 2: Participants

In order to understand the leadership qualities that contribute to high levels of parental

involvement, a number of school employees were interviewed. The leaders of the school, that is

the principal and the assistant principals, were chosen for the study because their leadership

greatly affects the direction of the school. For the purposes of this research study, the term

leadership team was used to include the principal and the assistant principals. Both the parent instructional support coordinator and the parent outreach liaison were interviewed because of their direct involvement with parents and the community. Four teachers were selected to participate in interviews. These teachers were selected with assistance from the school's principal. The principal was considered the informant as he had specific knowledge of the skill sets of specific teachers with regard to parental involvement. Two of the selected teachers were from the primary grades (K-2) and two were from the elementary grades (3-5) to ensure that the sample of teachers spanned across Saturn's grade levels. The number of years of teaching experience was also considered when interviewing teachers. Therefore two novice teachers and two experienced teachers were selected. For the purpose of this study a novice teacher was one with less than three years of teaching experience. An experienced teacher had three or more years of teaching experience.

In total there were 11 participants selected to participate in this study (see Figure 2). The principal of Saturn Elementary School was Dr. Smith (pseudonym). Dr. Smith was an African American male between the ages of 35-45. This job assignment was his first experience as a school principal, and he was entering his third year in the position at the time of the study. Before being hired as the principal at Saturn Elementary, Dr. Smith spent approximately eight years as an assistant principal at three different schools within the same school district. His years as an assistant principal were not consecutive, however, as he was an active member of the Army reserves. He spent the past twenty-one years as an active member of the reserves. He attributed many of his strengths and beliefs to the experiences that he had in both the military and in leadership positions in schools. Dr. Smith also completed a principal leadership training program in his district prior to becoming the principal of Saturn.

The school had four assistant principals, three of whom were interviewed for this research. The first assistant principal who participated in this study was Mr. Perez. Mr. Perez had been an assistant principal at Saturn for three years and was in his fourth year in a school leadership role. He was a Hispanic male between the ages of 45-55, had worked in education for 25 years, and spoke Spanish fluently. He oversaw the Title I and parent center programs at Saturn Elementary. He also provided leadership for two grade levels at the school.

The second assistant principal interviewed was Ms. Lopes. She was in her second year as an assistant principal at Saturn and previously worked as both a teacher and a district leader of staff development. Ms. Lopes was a White female between the ages of 30-40 years old. Ms. Lopes lead yearly staff development initiatives at the school and also provided leadership for two grade levels at the school.

The third assistant principal interviewed was Ms. Tills. Ms. Tills was a White female between the ages of 40-50. She had been an assistant principal at Saturn ever since the school opened. Since she was a charter member of the school staff, Ms. Tills had a valuable perspective on how the school had changed over the 13 years it had been in existence and had good insight on the plans and projects the school's leadership attempted to support their students. The fourth assistant principal was not available to be interviewed.

The school had a very active parent center. Two individuals coordinated all of the formal communications and outreach programs for parents at the school. The parent instructional support coordinator, Ms. Clarke, was a White female between the ages of 50-60. She had been in this role for 3 years and previously taught for 9 years before being hired at Saturn Elementary. Her main role was to take the funds made available through Title I and ensure that these funds were put to use to communicate, connect, and involve parents and the community. Her charge

was to examine student data, parent needs, and yearly school goals in order to create opportunities for parents that support all three of those needs. She was supported in her work by the parent liaison, Ms. Duncan.

Like Assistant Principal Tills, Ms. Duncan had been at the school since it opened in 2004. She described her role as a facilitator of communication between parents and the school. A fluent Spanish language speaker, Ms. Duncan often interpreted for parent-teacher conferences and frequently translated newsletters and other communication tools for the teachers. She also played a large role in determining what type of resources the parents need and desire most. When parents come to an event at the school, Ms. Duncan demonstrated the usefulness and availability of resources in the parent center. She worked with parents to determine their needs. This might mean buying books on tape or facilitating a workshop aimed at helping parents support their student with homework. She made it her goal to understand the community so that Saturn was meeting the real needs of families.

Teachers were the last group of stakeholders interviewed in this research. The teachers interviewed were recommended by the assistant principals as being teachers with differing perspectives on the school and on involving parents. In order to achieve this diversity of perspective, the assistant principals were asked to recommend between three and five teachers, of which at least two had less than three years of teaching experience and at least two had more than three years of experience. The assistant principals were also asked to provide at least two teachers who serve students in the primary grades and at least two in the elementary grades. A total of five teachers were interviewed and all of the desired criteria were met.

The first teacher interviewed was Ms. Callahan. Ms. Callahan was a White female between the ages of 25-35. She had seven years of teaching experience, all at Saturn. She was

considered to be a veteran. At the time of the research, she taught a 5th grade and had a class comprised of students who were directly served in the English Language Learner (ELL) program. Each student spoke a primary language other than English. Ms. Callahan spoke Spanish fluently and was certified in the state of Georgia to teach ELL students. Ms. Callahan has direct experience regarding community outreach. She wrote and received grant funding for a traveling book mobile last summer. The grant allowed her to make weekly trips to the apartment complexes near Saturn in order to provide summer reading materials to students and their families.

The second teacher interviewed, Ms. Rainey, was a White female between the ages of 20-30. She had three years of teaching experience, all at Saturn. She was considered a new teacher. She taught 4th grade and had done so for all of her three years. Before beginning her role as a 4th grade teacher, Ms. Rainey served as an intervention specialist in a neighboring county. In her class she taught all core academic classes and served on the school improvement team. This team was comprised of staff members devoted to improving Saturn.

The third teacher interviewed, Ms. Meredith, was a bilingual, Hispanic female between the ages of 20-30. She spoke both English and Spanish and was a first-year kindergarten teacher at Saturn. She was considered a new teacher. She had 19 students in her class with only four of those students coming from a home where English was spoken as the first language. Her class had 14 boys and 5 girls. A collaborative teacher who taught with and supported Ms. Meredith served students with special needs in her class. She did not serve on any leadership teams or committees, but did participate in the school's New Teacher Induction Program.

The final teacher interviewed was Ms. Krane. Ms. Krane was a White female between the ages of 20-30 and was also a first-year teacher. She was considered a new teacher. Before

accepting a position at Saturn, Ms. Krane completed a teaching practicum through her university at a rural K-6 school. She came to Saturn to teach 1st grade and had a class of just over 20 students. Many students in her class spoke Spanish and came to her with a wide range of academic abilities.

This group of teachers was chosen based on the school leadership team's recommendation. The leadership team was asked to recommend teachers who had been rated as highly effective and who had demonstrated an ability to collaborate with stakeholders of the school. Their experience in education spanned from first year teachers to a teacher with seven years of experience. Originally, the researcher sought a teacher with more experience to be interviewed, but few teachers with longer teaching careers exist at Saturn, a common challenged faced by high needs schools. (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2009).

Data collection & analysis.

Narrative data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interview questions, based on the participant's level of experience, are listed in Appendix A. As the researcher was not an employee of the school, the interviews were considered non-participant interviews. Since employees were interviewed based on their experiences, the degree of structure in the observational setting was considered natural (Yin, 2009). Eleven stakeholders were interviewed as the major source of data (Baran & Berry, 2015).

The researcher used the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) high needs school group research protocol to conduct this research (Baran & Berry, 2015). This protocol was appropriate for research following a social justice leadership framework, as the goal of the study was to better understand aspects of leadership that are critical in fostering success in high-needs schools. Following this protocol, the researcher began by conducting two

independent interviews with the principal; additional emails and phone calls were necessary for clarification of responses from those initial interviews. Next, interviews were conducted with three of the four assistant principals. These interviews with the principal and assistant principals gave insight into what the school leaders' roles were in facilitating parental involvement.

Following the interviews with the principal and assistant principals, the researcher conducted interviews with four teachers. Additional follow up interviews were necessary for clarification of responses from one of these initial interviews. Gaining specific information from teachers at the school provided another perspective on the effectiveness of the efforts to involve parents with their student's academic performance and social involvement. The ISLDN protocol defines novice leaders as individuals who have zero to three years of experience and experienced leaders as individuals having greater than three years of experience (Baran & Berry, 2015). The number of years of experience of the leadership team, the family center leaders, and the teachers were be noted per the ISLDN protocol. All of these interviews and follow-up conversations took place within a three-month period during August, September, and October of 2016.

Since the results of this study will contribute to a larger group of studies regarding high-needs schools, student demographic data and other school-related data were examined in order to provide a clear understanding of the school's characteristics and needs. The information about Saturn Elementary School was part of the public record and can be found on the State of Georgia Department of Education and county school district websites.

All interviews were conducted at the school and interviewee responses were recorded and transcribed. Interview transcriptions were recorded and then digitally saved on the researcher's computer. These files were password protected and only the researcher and his executive assistant at his school had the password. After the transcription was completed, a copy was sent

to each interviewee in order to verify that his or her intentions, perceptions, and/or thoughts were accurately recorded. This process is referred to as member checking (Carlson, 2010). Member checking was appropriate for this study as it allowed participants to not only review what they said, but it also enabled them to add what they believed was missing (Creswell, 1998). Through this process, participants were invited to respond with additional information for clarity. After all of the interviews were transcribed, and member checking was completed, a thematic analysis, using the guiding questions of the study as the basis for analysis, was conducted (Creswell, 2004). A thematic analysis looks for patterns in and more clearly describes the data that has been collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following paragraph will explain how this analysis was carried out.

To begin the thematic analysis, the researcher saved all of the interview transcripts to a software program on his computer. The three guiding questions of the research were used as the identifying nodes for the analysis. The software allowed the researcher to create nodes that he could use to label the interviews as they were read. In this program, nodes were defined as transcript identifiers that enabled the user to categorize important topics and themes. The researcher read through the interview data and coded them for alignment with the guiding question nodes. After coding all of the interviews, the researcher examined each node to find common words, ideas, and themes. The commonalities between interview data within each node were determined to be the final themes of the research. Each final theme was then aligned with key research on social justice leadership theory.

In order to reduce bias as much as possible, the researcher conducted the study at a school where he was not employed. However, at the time of the study, the researcher worked at a school with a very high level of parent involvement and therefore saw the inherent benefit of

parents being involved in their students' education. The researcher attempted to reduce this potential bias as a standardized set of questions was used to begin all interviews. All interviews were conducted on-site at the school being studied, and the educational affiliations of the researcher remained unknown to interviewees.

Results

The results of the research study are organized in the table below. The emerging themes are aligned with the final themes with which they correlate. Finally, the data sources which supported each final theme is included. After transcribing, coding, and analyzing the data, the researcher found five final themes aligned with the guiding questions of the research. Themes aligned with the guiding question regarding overcoming barriers to parental involvement included: (a) the principal had high expectations of his staff with regards to collaboration both between teachers and between teachers and parents, and (b) members of the school leadership team solicited and acted upon feedback from parents in order to create meaningful involvement opportunities.

Additional themes were found in the data that aligned with the next guiding question which examined leadership qualities that promoted parental involvement including: (a) leaders in the school created a welcoming environment where parents were given opportunities to be involved, and (b) leaders prioritized the needs of marginalized students in their school. The final theme was found to align with the guiding question that examined how efforts to involve parents impacted student outcomes. Based on the researcher's findings, students' whose parents are involved have greater levels of confidence, perform more willingly, and have an overall more positive outlook at school.

Research Questions	Nodes	Final Themes	Source Data
1. How do leaders in a high-needs elementary school overcome barriers to parental involvement?	• Leaders communicate vision of collaboration • Time is reserved for teacher collaboration • Parent center solicits feedback from families • Involvement opportunities align with parent needs • Support of parents provided outside of school • Principal is visible • Principal consistently interacts with parents • Parents participate on school improvement team	1. High expectations of collaboration between teachers and families. 2. Leaders use parent feedback in order to provide meaningful involvement opportunities 3. Leaders create a warm and welcoming school atmosphere	Interviews from: • Principal • 2 of 3 Assistant Principals • 1 Parent Instructional Support Coordinator • 1 Parent Liaison
2. Which leadership qualities possessed by school leaders impact the level of parental involvement in a high-needs school?	• Leaders provide resources for parents who cannot participate at school • Leaders listen to results of parent surveys • Leaders provide staff-wide professional development that targets needs of diverse students	4. Leaders prioritize needs of marginalized groups 5. Leaders are responsive to identified needs	Interviews from: • Principal • 2 of 3 Assistant Principals • 3 of 4 Teachers • 1 Parent Coordinator
3. How do efforts to increase parental involvement impact student outcomes?	• Student expectations are clear for families • Students better supported at home • Parents confident in helping students • Students confidence increased • Student participation increased as support from home increased	6. Students perform more willingly, have greater confidence and more positive outlook at school.	Interviews from: • 2 of 3 Assistant Principals • 4 of 4 Teachers

Figure 3: Thematic Analysis Table

As identified by the participants of the study, the major barriers to parental involvement at Saturn Elementary were *the language barrier* and *issues pertaining to families living in poverty.* Participants identified both of these barriers during the interviews and the majority of work to involve parents centered on overcoming these barriers.

Expectation of collaboration

The first major theme that emerged involved school leaders setting an expectation of effective collaboration. The collaborative culture that had been established was evident between some grade level teachers, between teachers and parents, and between the leadership team, teachers, and parents.

Principal Smith emphasized the importance of these collaborative meetings when he commented, "What we're doing there, we are teaching folks how to facilitate, how to work within the collaborative setting, how to do the work as required within a professional learning." He further explained that this work had one main goal that was "finding ways to decrease the variability that you see on a grade level when it comes to sound instructional practices."

Teachers reported that they were clear on the leadership team's vision for a collaborative community at Saturn Elementary. Teachers were given multiple opportunities each week to plan together. They use this time to create lesson plans, discuss levels of student achievement on common assessments, and to work together on ways to connect with students' families. Assistant Principal Lopes described the collaboration between teachers at Saturn Elementary:

> "We have collaborative planning twice a week, Monday and Wednesday; that's uninterrupted time where the teachers get together and plan their lessons. We do gradual release model here so everything is you do, I do, we do. And they get together and they do that as a team, which is nice. When they leave that time there are many lessons for the week that are planned so they don't have to worry about what they're going to do for their gradual release model in the morning. We (administrators) attend that. We also conduct evaluations and observations to make sure learning is going on there and if not, we definitely have conferences to point that out."

In order for this collaborative environment to impact families, a high level of effective communication was necessary. Having a large percentage of non-English speaking parents was a great challenge for the school. If these non-English speaking parents were to be reached and included in these collaborative efforts, work was required.

Parent feedback drove support

The parent outreach center was the hub of the school for overcoming barriers to parental involvement. Ms. Clarke and Ms. Duncan staffed the center and worked to identify, and then meet, the specific needs of the families associated with Saturn Elementary School. The goal of the parent center was to provide meaningful opportunities and resources for parents that align with the academic goals and needs of their students.

In order for the leaders in the parent outreach center to provide resources that met real needs, Ms. Duncan, the parent liaison, was continually in contact with parents. This next theme, soliciting input from parents and then acting upon that information to provide meaningful support, led to a role relished by Ms. Duncan. "I love these families and they know it. I think when you are genuine and you have authenticity you don't have to be a perfectionist, you know, you don't have to do everything correct. What you have to do is have them know that you love them in any language," said Ms. Duncan as she described her love of her position. She interacted with parents who came to the school and also acted as a Spanish language translator for teachers communicating with parents. Ms. Duncan reported that offering bilingual services helped parents feel more comfortable and less intimidated when interacting with the school and its teachers and employees. She noted that many of Saturn's parents have no formal educational experience in this country and are often hesitant to ask the school for help due to their unfamiliarity with its structure and norms. As Ms. Duncan interacted with parents through these different methods, she

was constantly assessing the needs of families and asking parents how she can support them as they support their students. She also communicated with teachers on a regular basis in order to learn which students had the greatest needs. Acting as a go-between for parents and teachers, Ms. Duncan helped with communication to ensure that resources given to parents were needed by parents and/or recommended by teachers. For example, she regularly provided families with ways to help their students in literacy. As a way to assess the center's resources she worked to get feedback to ensure that what she was purchasing was aligned with teachers, families, and students' real needs. "So they let us know what works. Flash cards, books on tape, DVDs. They let me know what works. And we make sure that whenever we have the money to buy materials, that those are the materials that we address." This ability to understand both the needs of the parents and the teachers allows Ms. Duncan to provide a large number of resources that are valued by families and that support student achievement.

Since many families at Saturn Elementary were not able to volunteer at the school due to work schedules, additional resources allowed parents to increase their involvement in their student's education by increasing their ability to help with school work at home. Saturn Elementary, however, did not only support parents' ability to help their kids at home. One of the other priorities for Ms. Clarke, the parent instructional support coordinator, was to provide learning opportunities at the school for parents. She worked collaboratively with the leadership team and the teachers to align those sessions with school goals and the needs determined by teachers.

One example of a learning opportunity for parents was implemented during the 2016-2017 school year. One of the school's goals was to begin the journey towards being STEM (Science Technology Engineering Math) certified in the state of Georgia. In order to help parents

understand the types of STEM assignments and projects that their students would be completing, an outreach night was planned in which parents were taught the expectations and the concepts included in STEM learning. Similar parent learning opportunities were provided in previous years when the Common Core math standards were first introduced. The opportunities were provided through parent workshops. These workshops provided subject instructions, opportunities for parents to practice, and sessions for questions. The math workshops aligned with Saturn Elementary's goal that year: "to improve math achievement for all students." During the 2015-2016 school year, when the primary goal was improving literacy, parent learning opportunities were provided to help instruct parents how to assist their students with literacy at home. This effort was particularly challenging since many parents are non-English speaking.

The facilitators of these workshops focused on ways that even non-English speaking parents could support their students as they learned literacy skills. In one example, a presenter gave parents five questions that they could ask their students after every book or chapter they read. Questions like: What is the theme? Who are the main characters? These questions, and similar questions, allowed parents who were non-English speaking to assist their children. With this simple method of involvement, students were able to practice and gain better mastery of the literacy standards. These opportunities were provided because the leadership team showed a commitment to supporting and funding the school's parent outreach center.

The parent center workers were not the only personnel involved in the efforts to provide resources to parents. Teachers were also deeply involved in efforts to increase collaboration within the school community. The school leadership team embodied the concept brought forth by Fullan (1993): Every person could be a change agent. A fifth grade teacher, Ms. Callahan, determined that students needed to continue their readings efforts during the summer. In

response to the need she wrote, and was awarded, a $3,500 grant to develop a book mobile that would serve some of the low-income apartment complexes surrounding Saturn Elementary. Ms. Callahan used the money to purchase books at different reading levels and then went out to the community on a weekly basis during summer break to lend books to students. Students checked out books from the book mobile each week and then traded them in for new ones the next week when the book mobile returned. With many students having parents working outside of the home, transportation issues and the time factor required to get to and from the library during operating hours often prevented them from obtaining new reading materials over the summer. Ms. Callahan's work to develop the book mobile overcame these transportation and time barriers common to many students living in the area around the school.

Welcoming environment and prioritization of needs

The second guiding question of the research looked to highlight the qualities or characteristics of the school leaders that had the biggest impact on parental involvement at a high needs elementary school. One of the themes that emerged from the interviews regarding this topic was that the leadership team was purposeful in creating a welcoming and inviting environment for parents in the school. Parent center worker, Ms. Duncan explained why this inviting environment was so important at Saturn. "School is intimidating to a lot of our parents because they're not quite sure if it's a place that can be trusted or not and so we really have to create that environment for them." Understanding these trust issues led the leadership team to focus on maintaining an inviting atmosphere. Ms. Rainey noted that Principal Smith lead these efforts to improve the school's atmosphere. "So I know that Dr. Smith is very concerned with being out there in the community so people recognize him and feel comfortable talking to him." Regarding the leadership team, she remarked, "they do their very best to make sure that they

understand, the parents understand, that we're here to support their children and to support them…they just go out of their way to make parents feel like their opinions matter here." Ms. Krane recalled first encountering the special culture of Saturn Elementary while she was waiting to interview for a teaching position at the school with Dr. Smith.

> It was Dr. Smith. I was sitting in the office and a family was leaving and he was so upset that the family was leaving. He just knew the small stuff, little details about the family and when birthdays were and baseball and stuff like that. I just thought it was so great that the kids were so excited to see him. You know, he's so busy but he took the time and he knew so much about that family.

This welcoming approach seemed to be embodied by teachers and school leaders alike. First year teacher, Ms. Meredith, described how she could observe the welcoming nature of the school. "I honestly think it's the atmosphere of the school," she said. "Just because anything I've been a part of where parents have been invited to come, there's such a high participation. I think it's honestly just how inviting…our school does a lot to make parents feel like their child is first." School employees build a welcoming atmosphere by making sure that all parents, particularly those who are non-English speaking, feel welcome at all events. "So like any meeting I sat on there's always a translator. There's always somebody." Being able to provide these translation services on a regular basis required that the leader prioritize bilingualism when hiring and when providing professional development opportunities for teachers. This evidence of the priority for non-English speaking employees was noted in the small sample group that was interviewed for this study, since one of the school's administrators, one of the parent center workers, and one of the teachers interviewed spoke Spanish.

Having an open and welcoming atmosphere was important if the school wanted to help parents from different backgrounds navigate new educational processes and structures. The parent liaison, Ms. Duncan, believed that this was essential in raising the level of involvement "by being friendly, and open, and encouraging them to come in. They are coming in from other countries. Where this is new. I mean just the building alone can be very intimidating. They don't come from villages that have sprawling educational facilities every twelve blocks the way we have it here." This willingness to understand parents' feelings and needs contributed to the welcoming and inviting atmosphere at Saturn Elementary.

The prioritization of parents' needs was also noted in how the school proactively and intentionally solicited parent feedback and participation. The parent center solicited feedback from parents in order to both understand the needs of the school community, and appreciate the perception the community had of the school. The school regularly set up opportunities for parents to ask questions and make suggestions for improvements. One way in which the school directly involved the parents was through inviting them to participate on the local school council. This council was a group of stakeholders, including school leaders, parents, teachers and other interested community members, who stay connected with the decision making processes of the school. The local school council learned about implementation of yearly academic goals for the school, examined current levels of academic performance, and discussed community and school needs. Parents and community members generally served two-year terms on the council and were a direct voice that was heard by the principal and the school leadership team. It was noted that this opportunity was not one that all parents at Saturn parents can take advantage of due to work schedules and other constraints. Even so, the school valued community members and parents communicating ideas and their needs.

This level of communication and involvement was not seen exclusively with those parents and community members who participated on the school council. There was also an expectation from the leadership team for all teachers and employees of Saturn Elementary to maintain a high level of communication. Teachers used multiple forms of communication to connect with parents. The two least experienced teachers interviewed for this study reported having used an online communication tool called Class Dojo. This program has a Facebook-like interface in which parents see updates sent by the teacher. Parents also have the opportunity to respond and have correspondence through this program, giving them instant access to feedback and information from the teacher. Other teachers reported sending home Friday Folders in which information was sent home in the student's home or primary language. The parent center also promoted learning opportunities and community involvement activities via phone calls, emails, and direct mailings. This overall focus on, and commitment to communication was a priority for Dr. Smith. His proactive approach to ongoing communication efforts helped to bridge the gap between parents and the school.

Positive student outcomes

The final theme that emerged from the interviews related to the third guiding question of this research which aimed to understand the impact that efforts to involve parents had on student outcomes. School leaders and teachers alike responded that parental involvement had a positive impact on their students. Fourth grade teacher, Ms. Redmond, commented the impact of the parent learning opportunities. "Their parents learn more. The parents always come back with great feedback about these events, and so parents are more aware of what the expectations are for their child. They know how to help them a little bit more and the student just seems more engaged in class." She later stated regarding the impact of parental involvement on her students

"I think…for the most there is a higher quality of work when parents are involved because they are accountable for their work." When levels of parental involvement had been high, there was an increased clarity regarding expectations, and that this clarity led to students having higher levels of confidence. The belief of the interviewees was this confidence should in turn lead to greater academic successes.

Saturn Elementary made a concerted effort to help parents better support their students. This support did not always center on the curriculum or the academic growth of the students. Dr. Smith noted, "It might not be involvement to the point where they are understanding the actual curriculum, but it may be involvement of ensuring that the child has a healthy meal, that the child has a place to lay their head, and that there's a place provided in the home for the child to engage in learning." He continued, "Ensuring there's a time and place for homework set aside." Dr. Smith, the leadership team, and those staffing the Parent Center believed in supporting the whole child; and that included, at times, teaching parents how to provide this support. It was noted in interviews that many of the parents were not aware of the importance of things like nutrition and sleep requirements. Helping parents grow in their understanding of these concepts ultimately should have a positive impact on their students' ability to do their best at school. Saturn Elementary School worked to provide training for parents regarding these basic needs. And once they were understood, the parents could focus on providing academic and social supports for their children.

Parents who understood the academic, social, and structural expectations of the school were better able to help their students be successful than are those who saw school structures as being unfamiliar (Bartel, 2010). Whether through the parent learning opportunities provided or via personal conferences with their child's teachers, parents at Saturn Elementary were taught

about the curriculum, taught how to access resources, and taught how to help their students with their academic growth.

Parents who took advantage of these involvement opportunities grew in their confidence and were able to incorporate their new-found knowledge to help their students. Ms. Rainey described the understanding that she saw parents come to as "This is how they're doing it at Saturn, maybe I can help support my child at home too." This gain in parental confidence in their ability to support from home was noted with parents who are non-English speaking. One teacher described how she taught parents how to support their child's reading at home even if the parent did not speak English. Her grade level created a list of questions that parents could ask their child for each book they read. Dr. Smith summarized the importance of this level of involvement when talking about this type of academic support. "It doesn't even have to be right, but the fact that they are actually engaging their child in a conversation regarding a book that they're reading…it sends a message to the child that, hey my parents care a lot about me." This involvement and level of support bolstered the confidence of students.

Parents who took advantage of the opportunities offered by the school had a greater ability and desire to help their students with their homework, on projects, and in daily studying of the curriculum. This support led to higher confidence levels in students. "The child feels more comfortable in school because they've got some extra practice at home," explained Ms. Rainey. "For the most part there is a higher quality of work when parents are involved because they are accountable for their work both here and at home; so there's no not doing it." This consistency benefitted students' confidence and consequently their academic success.

Parents who took advantage of the involvement opportunities also learned the expectations and structures of the school. Parents felt more confident approaching the school

personal for help and were comfortable asking for resources. These resources helped them participate to a greater degree in their students' learning. Ms. Duncan, the parent outreach liaison, recounted many conversations she had with parents such as, "My child is struggling here. What kind of resources do you have here?" She continued, "…we have a wealth of resources here. But if they don't know, and they won't if they're never in the building, they won't know enough to ask. So I think the involvement of workshops...helps parents to get a comfort level to be able to ask for what they need." Some parents borrowed physical resources like math manipulatives, DVDs, and computer software. Some resources, such as the physical books delivered by the summer book mobile, were examples of consumable resources that the school identified as being of great need. Helping parents understand that these tangible resources were available impacted student achievement because they understand resources are available to support student learning.

The parent center workers, Ms. Clarke and Ms. Duncan, discovered that some of the desired resources were physical resources while others were resources of human capital. In the past, some parents participated in introductory English proficiency classes that had been offered to support non-English speaking parents. Others had learned how to help their students with basic math or reading skills. When parents gained this knowledge and then grew in their ability to communicate, students had more academic assistance. In providing these types of supportive resources, Saturn Elementary teachers were able to teach parents how to be an additional resource for their students.

Implications

The results of this study showed a number of important factors in initiating and sustaining parental involvement in a high needs elementary school. The final themes that resulted from the

interviews at the high needs elementary school were: Leaders had high expectations for collaboration, parent feedback drove decisions about support, leaders created a welcoming environment for parents, leaders prioritized the needs of their marginalized populations, and student outcomes were positively impacted by increased parental involvement. The implications of these final themes are discussed below with regard to how they relate to school leaders' responsibility for enacting social justice. The role leadership preparation programs' in training future leaders to address the needs of marginalized student populations is also addressed.

Implications for school leadership teams.

Understanding the needs of traditionally marginalized populations, such as students with non-English speaking parents, and then creating the conditions for positive change is a hallmark of social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2007; Bell, Jones, & Johnson, 2002). The principal of Saturn Elementary was a leader for social justice through his efforts to identify the need for change and then develop practical solutions in order to reach the school's goals (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002). This direction and focus was set by the principal and carried out by not only the teachers, but also by the workers in the parent outreach center. The workers in the parent center clearly had a desire to understand the needs of their students and parents. Capper, Theoharis, and Sebastian (2006) described this as a consciousness of the needs of high-needs groups. "We argue that school leaders need to embody a social justice consciousness within their belief systems or values. This includes needing to possess a deep understanding of power relations and social construction including white privilege, heterosexism, poverty, misogyny, and ethnocentrism" (Capper. Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006, p. 213). The parent center workers attempted to understand the barriers felt by their community members. They were committed to providing support to parents, so that those parents could in-turn help their own students who needed

support. This direction and prioritization was a direct result of the expectations and directives from Principal Smith. Developing the capacity of other school employees to meet the needs of these students and parents is identified in the research as a critical role of successful leaders for social justice (Theoharis, 2007).

School leaders who wish to create a collaborative culture between parents and the school must consistently communicate this expectation with their teachers and support staff. At Saturn Elementary a clear vision was communicated and then backed up with timely and meaningful support. This support gave teachers the freedom and ability to connect with parents in ways that were appropriate for the identified needs. This understanding that each parent's situation is unique was key in providing the flexibility necessary to support a range of needs regarding involvement.

Content-driven parent learning opportunities helped align student needs with the parents' ability to support these needs. Having content-rich opportunities helped to prepare parents, who could then better support their students' learning. In order for these learning opportunities to occur, the leadership team had to carefully consider how to overcome the logistical barriers seen at Saturn Elementary in order to ensure the programs' success. Fullan (1993) asserts that meaningful change occurs when leaders assess the unique conditions of their school as the basis for their decisions about support. The leadership team at Saturn Elementary approached these types of involvement opportunities with a willingness to continue to provide support where the school's community needed it most.

At one parent learning opportunity, the leadership team noticed many of the families that attended the learning nights did not have access to childcare and therefore brought their younger children with them. The leadership team learned from these experiences and opted to provide

childcare for these events. Mr. Perez, one of the assistant principals, commented that the

leadership team recognized that having simultaneous translations during meetings was very

distracting to all involved. At the time of the study, the school's leadership was considering

having two sessions of each learning opportunity, one in English and one in Spanish. The

leadership team wanted to ensure that their outreach efforts continued to improve and better meet

the needs of their parents and families. This focus and prioritization on the needs of traditionally

marginalized populations is identified as a cornerstone for leaders of social justice (Bogotch,

2002).

It is important that leaders for social justice look outside of the traditional lens when

considering parental involvement. They must be willing to accept that direct parental

participation at school may not be a reasonable expectation for many (LaRocque, Kleiman, &

Darling, 2011; Weinshenker, 2015). Leaders must know, and communicate to all stakeholders,

that other forms of parent involvement may be more prevalent in their particular community, and

that parents may not value the traditional forms of participation often seen at less diverse

schools. They must be careful not to value one type of involvement over another. If not realized

and accounted for, this implicit bias might manifest in a school becoming content with only

providing for those parents who volunteer in classes or who regularly attend school events and

functions (Sawyer, 2015).

Members of Saturn Elementary School's leadership team, the principal and assistant

principals, took the lead in prioritizing the needs of their parents. Examples such as providing

multiple opportunities for parents to attend meetings and providing translating services at all

events also contributed to the welcoming environment of the school. This prioritization and

advocating for the needs of these typically marginalized groups was again aligned with what

Jean-Marie, Normore, and Brooks (2009) describe as the responsibility of leaders for social justice. "The role of school leaders is at least in part to advocate on behalf of traditionally marginalized and poorly-served students..." (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009, p. 4). By working to understand the supports needed, and then providing those supports, Saturn Elementary's leadership team embodied the spirit of social justice leadership.

The final theme gleaned from this research centered on student outcomes due to high levels of parental involvement. In their research, Riester, Pursch, & Skrla (2002) explained that successful leaders for social justice are able to identify the needs of their marginalized students and then act to ensure that real change occurs. The results of this study reaffirmed Gordon, Bridglall and Meroe's (2005) conclusion that providing access to education is not enough for marginalized students. If the benefits of initiatives, such as increasing parental involvement, are to impact student outcomes in high needs schools, leaders must make the needs of these populations a priority. Saturn Elementary School experienced academic success for their students despite the challenges associated with poverty and non-English speaking students. Progress in this high needs elementary school required a focus and dedication from the school's leadership to identify and understand the barriers faced by their students. Only then could they, and possibly others, carry out their plan to improve parental involvement in order to positively impact their students' academic outcomes.

Implications for leadership preparation programs

Being the leader of a school, in and of itself, is a tremendous challenge. If our public school systems are to see success in a landscape where the needs are constantly growing and changing, great leadership is needed (Kemp-Graham, 2015). Future leaders could benefit from having field experiences in order to be properly prepared to take over schools facing the

challenges of language and poverty (Reis, Lu, & Miller, 2016). Dr. Smith, principal of Saturn

Elementary School, worked to understand and then prioritize the needs of marginalized students

in his school. School districts who face similar challenges as those at Saturn Elementary have a

responsibility to provide training for their leaders in order to broaden their perspective and their

understanding of the work that must be done in order to achieve success and growth in schools

with these challenges. Districts would also benefit from strategic placement of leaders in high

needs schools who already have this type of training in place. Schools that face the challenges of

poverty and low English proficiency need leaders who are open-minded, able to be responsive to

changing situations and needs, and can manage to implement the needed change within the

cultural constraints of their school and district (Ryan, 2016). When training potential principals

to lead schools like Saturn Elementary School, leadership training programs must help these

leaders recognize the different avenues for parental involvement and see each of these as

strengths of the community rather than deficits. Successful leaders will be able to tap into the

indigenous resources in their community and value the diverse ways in which parents are

involved in their students' education. It is important that leadership preparation programs do not

assume that future leaders have these abilities. Many teachers and leaders did not personally

experience the same challenges in school that today's students face (Amatea, Cholewa, &

Mixon, 2012). If leaders are not required to explore the challenges experienced by these schools,

then school districts may be less likely to experience success in their high needs schools. If this is

the case, we will continue to have pockets of academic excellence, surrounded by seas of

mediocrity.

Leader training programs that prepare principals to be successful in high-needs schools

must identify those candidates whose actions reflect their commitment and prepare those leaders

to deal with potential resistance to their mission for change (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). In this study, the interviews with teachers clearly showed that Saturn Elementary School's principal has worked to overcome any resistance by inspiring others to give their best and by always setting an example of inclusion and positivity in his interactions with parents. His actions speak louder than his words. Needs from school to school will always differ. Being willing to be responsive to needs and while not settling for the status quo is essential if leaders of high-needs school are to meet the diverse needs in their schools (Rigby, 2014).

Understanding the needs of their community is the responsibility of the school leaders and the need to work diligently to provide resources and support to meet those identified needs must be championed by leaders for social justice (Theoharis, 2007). Leaders must proactively seek to understand the cultures, the experiences, and the lives of their families, and then put those central to their advocacy, so that their support and involvement matches the actual needs of parents (Rigby, 2014). This responsiveness is crucial to social justice leaders as they work to align school-wide priorities in order to support marginalized groups of students and their parents in order that their beliefs about social justice become a reality (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

Suggestions for future study

While the findings of this research are promising, a more comprehensive study, particularly one with a larger sample of schools, would allow for greater generalization of results. The school examined in this research was deemed as high-needs due to its low English proficiency and the low socioeconomic status of its students. Further study might include schools with different needs across different districts. As mentioned previously, the school district in where Saturn Elementary is situated has tremendous resources. A study examining high-needs

schools across districts with a range of resources and relative affluence would provide a more robust understanding of successful leadership practices in high-needs schools.

It would also be beneficial to study the practices of Saturn Elementary over a long period of time since sustainability of programs efforts is a key for social justice leaders (Theoharis, 2009). A longitudinal, multi-year study would allow for a more full understanding of in lasting impact of the efforts of the leadership at Saturn Elementary.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to the implications and conclusions of this study. First, at the time of the study, the researcher was an employee of the same school district as the school being studied. Therefore there may be some bias regarding the value of some of the programs utilized by this school and the district. Another limitation was that no parents were interviewed regarding the school's efforts to support their involvement in their children's education. All interviews were conducted using school employees. There were also limitations concerning the size and scope of the study. The study only looked at one large school in a district. Since only one school was studied, and knowing that needs vary greatly from one school to the next, the results and conclusions may not be transferrable for all high-needs elementary schools.

Also, while the community served by this school would be considered high-needs, the school itself was a part of a large district in the state of Georgia. So while the school's families may not have had extensive resources, the school itself had access to a tremendous amount of funding to provide programs and support the outreach work.

Conclusion

Having parents and community members actively involved in schools has repeatedly been shown to improve student outcomes across demographic lines and socio-economic status

(Sheridan et al., 2012; Hill & Craft, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Creating outreach programs that foster home-school relationships can be a challenge due to the varying nature of the obstacles faced by parents in high-needs schools (Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Having a large percentage of their families living in poverty and a high number of students whose first language is not English are two major challenges faced by the school examined in this study. It is the job of leaders of high-needs schools like Saturn Elementary to be leaders for social justice. School leaders must be diligent in their work to first identify the challenges faced by students in their school and then work to put resources to work to support those challenges.

High-needs schools need these leaders for social justice if they are to make positive strides towards increased levels of parental involvement. This study revealed that these leaders begin by setting an expectation of collaboration in the school. The collaborative culture at Saturn Elementary has led a feeling that all students are an integral part of the school. This feeling leads to a welcoming atmosphere for parents and students at the school. Creating this type of welcoming atmosphere stems not only from the collaborative nature of the teachers and staff, but also from the example set by the principal. Leaders have the ability to create a welcoming and inviting school environment by the example that they set. This environment helps parents to believe that their needs are important. Supporting increased levels of communication and outreach is a critical part of promoting social justice in a high needs school. If schools cannot effectively communicate with families and the community, they will find it difficult to assess their actual needs. If, however, parents are encouraged to give their feedback and input, structures and supports may be provided which align with both the school's goals and the needs of their families. When all of these do actually align, there is a greater potential for student academic and social success.

The ultimate goal of any school program, whether focused on parent involvement or not, is to benefit students. This study provided further research to support that increased levels of parental involvement lead to higher student confidence and positive student attitudes towards school. Leaders of this high-needs elementary school approach their support of students and parents through the lens of social justice and are seeing positive student academic outcomes.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Appendix A.1 Questions for Principal Interview #1:

1. What is the background of this school?

2. Describe the current mission and vision of the school.

3. Describe the culture of the school.

4. What were your reasons for applying for the principalship?

5. What are your most significant leadership contributions to this school?

6. How do you contribute to a culture of learning in this school?

7. How do you contribute to individual and organizational performance in this school?

8. What long-term learning goals have you set for the school?

9. What challenges does the school face in strengthening a culture of learning?

10. How does the internal environment of your school impact learning?

Questions for Principal Interview #2:

1. How does the external environment of your school (parent, community, policy, political and system/central office stakeholders) impact on learning?

2. Please give examples of how learning is supported in your school

3. How is leadership distributed in the school, and what has been your role in this?

4. What short-term/long-term goals have you set to build staff capacity in the school?

5. How do you help develop the capacity of self and others in attaining those goals?

6. Please give evidence of progress that you are making toward reaching these goals.

7. How does the internal environment of the school influence leadership structure, practices and processes?

8. How does the external environment of the school (parent, community, policy, political and system/central office stakeholders) influence leadership structure, practices and processes?

9. Some culminating questions: Are there any other ideas that you would like to share that have not been covered?

Appendix A.2 Questions for Staff Interview:

1. What is the background of this school?

2. Please describe the current mission and vision of the school.

3. Please describe the culture of the school as it pertains to learning.

4. What supports are in place to impact learning in your school?

5. Please give examples of how learning is supported in your school.

6. How do you contribute to learning in your school?

7. How is leadership distributed in your school?

8. How do you view your role in the school? What support systems exist to nurture and
    develop your leadership?

9. How do leaders support and sustain the culture of learning in your school?

10. How do you feel your school leader models and encourages continuous learning?

11. What challenges/barriers do the school face in strengthening a culture of learning?

12. How does the internal environment of your school impact learning?

13. How does the external environment of your school (parent, community, policy, political and system/central office stakeholders) impact learning?

14. How does the internal environment of your school influence leadership practices and
    processes?

15. How does the external environment of your school (parent, community, policy, political and system/central office stakeholders) influence leadership practices and processes?

16. Culminating question: Are there any other ideas that you would like to share that have

not been covered?

Appendix A.3 Questions for Parent Interviews:

1. What is the background of this school?

2. Describe the learning environment of the school.

3. Provide an example of how the school is a good environment for learning?

4. How would you describe the principal's influence on student learning?

5. Who else is important in improving student learning?

6. What learning goals have been set for students in the school?

7. How do parents and community members contribute to the learning in your school?

8. What challenges does the school face in strengthening the learning culture

9. Please give examples of how learning is supported in your school.

10. Culminating question: Are there any other ideas that you would like to share that have

not been covered?