FOSTERING EFFECTIVE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT:
THE CASE FOR DEVELOPING SCHOOL-SPONSORED PROGRAMMING
TO ASSIST MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENTS

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DEDICATION

For Kathryn and Daniel

“The greatest gifts you can give your children
are the roots of responsibility and the wings of independence.”

~ Denis Waitley
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ABSTRACT

Parents play an instrumental role in the academic and social success of their children, yet levels of parent involvement significantly decrease as students enter their middle school years. Middle school communities can better the social experiences and academic outcomes of their students when families and the school work in collaboration. Successful partnerships are formed when groups understand one another’s needs and leads to more efficient and higher levels of involvement. This research study interviewed eleven parents of early adolescents to identify the needs of middle school parents, characterize their interactions with the middle school, and evaluate the effectiveness of school-sponsored programming as a means of addressing parent needs and improving interactions with the middle school. The parents interviewed recognized their children’s increasing need for independence as well as tendencies to test boundaries and the new importance of the child’s peer group. Parents felt they had to adjust their parenting practices to accommodate their early adolescent’s needs and looked to the school as a resource. School interactions were viewed positively; however, the efficiency of communication left much to be desired by parents. School-sponsored programming was deemed an effective tool for middle schools to increase parental involvement as it addressed parental needs for information on relevant topics, provided affirmation of parenting practices, and afforded parents the opportunity to dialogue with peers and professionals about the needs of early adolescents.

Keywords: parental involvement, middle school, school-sponsored programming
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Despite the known benefits for student outcomes associated with parental involvement, schools fail to consistently encourage parental involvement past the elementary years and parental involvement levels decrease significantly as students transition to middle and high school. Unclear expectations for parental involvement (Brooks, 2009; Epstein, 2011; Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates, & Petit, 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, 2005; Pleyvak & Heaston, 2001; Price-Mitchell, 2009), lack of communication between schools and families (Brooks, 2009; Eberly, Joshi, & Konzal, 2007; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 2011; Ferrara, 2009; Feuerstein, 2010; Hill et al., 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), and parents’ decreased feelings of efficacy in being able to address the needs of adolescents (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Grolnick, Benject, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997, Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001) are considered to be major contributors to the decrease in parental involvement.

Purpose of the Study

In schools across the United States of America administrators and teachers welcome parents into their buildings for what is often termed, “Back-to-School Night”. As teachers hurriedly rush through speeches on homework policies, curriculum highlights, and behavior expectations parents frequently question what level of involvement and support they should provide. Teachers tend to respond with a discussion of student time on task, providing a quiet study spot, and keeping communication between school and home open, often failing to provide
specific, detailed instruction on how parents can support their middle school students due to the
time constraints of the evening. Unfortunately, there never seems to be a time in which teachers
and administrators can provide parents with explicit instructions on how to be effectively
involved and support their students’ education. Parents are left to their own devices to figure out
how much support is enough, resulting in a gamut of parental involvement levels from the
practically non-existent to the overbearing, helicopter parent. Frustration on the part of parents,
teachers, and ultimately students ensues because of the lack of consistent collaboration and
support.

Regardless of the known benefits, levels of parental involvement are frequently
inconsistent. Parents have little guidance on how to realistically involve themselves in their
child’s education and educational stakeholders (parents, teachers, and administrators) often have
different ideas of what constitutes effective parental involvement. Through the effective
incorporation of parents into their children’s education, the entire learning community could
experience a myriad of benefits including higher levels of student competence (Ferrara, 2009;
Gould, 2011; Pleyvak & Heaston, 2001), improved student grades and results on standardized
tests (Epstein, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson.,
2005), increased attendance (Ferrara, 2009; Mattingly et al., 2002), lower drop-out and grade
retention rates (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005; Mattingly et al., 2002; Pleyvak & Heaston, 2001),
better-quality student attitudes and behaviors (Epstein, 2011; Ferrara, 2009; Gould, 2011;
Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mattingly et al., 2002; Price-Mitchell, 2009) and higher rates of
participation in advanced level coursework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The benefits for
student success are long lasting and apply to all students regardless of socio-economic status,
race, ethnicity, gender or age (Brooks, 2009; Epstein, 2011; Mattingly et al., 2002; Turney & Kao, 2009; Wiseman, 2010).

A large body of the research regarding parental involvement focuses on the frequency of parent involvement and the types of involvement behaviors employed by parents, yet more work is needed to identify why certain types of involvement are more beneficial than others (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). A host of strategies have been suggested by researchers to improve parental involvement, yet, few studies actually examine the effect of the strategies and interventions on the different groups of educational stakeholders. There is a need for research on the impact of specific parental involvement strategies, such as educating parents of middle school students on the importance of parental involvement through focused workshops, for the various stakeholders in a school setting. The strategy or intervention would need to be developed, implemented, and assessed based on the varying needs of each group of stakeholders.

As invested members involved in the education of children, it seems only logical that teachers and administrators would actively seek out opportunities to involve and incorporate parents in their children’s education. It is particularly important when parental involvement increases children’s achievement levels and educational experiences. In theory, involving parents appears to be a simple, and feasible approach to increase student academic and social success. In practice, the multi-dimensional nature of parental relationships with teachers, administrators, and students makes effectively incorporating parents in their children’s education a much more complex endeavor, particularly as students advance into the middle school years. By examining specific parental involvement strategies and their impact on the different stakeholder groups through a qualitative lens, educators will have a better understanding of how
to address parent needs and effectively incorporate parental involvement in the education of their middle school aged students.

The middle school years (grades 5-8) coincide with one of the most tumultuous developmental stages for children – early adolescence (ages 10-14). The angst of adolescence is well documented in film, literature, television, and the personal narratives of almost any adult. As any middle school teacher can attest, when working with adolescents one never knows what problems they will encounter from day-to-day, hour-to-hour, or even minute-to-minute. The early adolescent years are fraught with high levels of emotion, drastic physical changes, increased cognitive abilities, and a host of new social issues which children need to understand and learn to navigate independently. Academically, student performance and achievement in the middle school years often determines their future academic placement and career paths, making the middle school years a turning point in a child’s education (MacIver and Epstein, 1993).

Given the extreme transformation early adolescent students undergo on an almost daily basis, the need for a strong support system of teachers, administration, and parents working together is paramount.

A qualitative study of middle school parental involvement will enhance the current body of parental involvement research, improve school practices, and inform policy makers. Through examination of current parental involvement practices, this study seeks to identify barriers to middle school involvement and assess how specific programming choices can break down the barriers to parental involvement. Utilizing traditional parental involvement programming such as conferences, assemblies, and student events with the incorporation of new and unique school sponsored programs such as a tailored workshop based on stakeholder needs the researcher will track parental involvement levels and attitudes through on-going assessment. The aim of the
programming is to increase and enhance parent perceptions of parental involvement, increase attendance of parents at school events, and track levels of improved student academic, behavioral, and social outcomes. Study findings can be implemented and tested in different middle school settings and lead to policy changes regarding incorporating parents in middle school education.

**Positionality Statement**

The researcher in a qualitative study not only collects and analyzes data, but immerses themselves in the community of study. Researcher behaviors and views can have significant impact on the collection process and study results. As a student researcher reflecting on my personal perspectives and biases regarding early adolescents, middle school parents, and the home-school connection, I must examine how my personal and professional background influences my beliefs and actions.

Growing up in a suburban setting, the oldest of three children to two white, college-educated parents, high expectations for academic performance and encouragement for building peer relationships through sports and activities (scouts, dance, etc.) were the norm. Long before the discussion of socialization strategy (Hill & Tyson, 2009), my parents realized that speaking to their children about the importance of school, courses, and peer relationships was a strong form of parental support and an active way to involve themselves in their children’s education. Additionally, my mother volunteered in the school, was a member of the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), and was a scout leader. My father coached youth sports, and both parents assisted with school work, encouraged reading outside of school, and attended all school-related performances, conferences, and meetings. Parental involvement expert Joyce Epstein (1995)
identified six categories for parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Growing up, my parents were involved in activities associated with each of Epstein’s (1995) categories for parental involvement. While their involvement may not be the only factor for the successful raising of three children, all of whom went on to college and have successful careers in their chosen fields, their involvement in the education of their children was definitely a positive influence and has strongly shaped my perceptions of how families should be involved and support their children.

Equally compelling in the discovery of personal perspectives and biases is the role of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. Due to my father’s work in sales, we moved several times over my childhood, yet we always settled in fairly similar environments: suburban, predominantly white, and upper middle class. Social scientists agree that in the American school system a white, middle class perspective is the norm (Bourdieu, 1989; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Yosso, 2005) and students who possess middle class values and knowledge are more adaptive and able to benefit from school life (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). My personal experience is strongly associated with these norms and my exposure to students and families of different race, ethnicity, and social class is limited. Having involved parents and belonging to the dominant group have influenced my position and my perspectives. As a member of the dominant group, I must be cognizant that my experience is simply one type of experience and cannot hold more value than the experience of others, particularly when working with study participants of different background.

Aside from my childhood experience, my knowledge of parental involvement as the parent of adolescents also influences my perspectives and biases. As a single, full-time working
mother and doctoral student, my ability to volunteer and coach may not be the equal to the level of my own parents, but I employ other tenets of socialization strategy (Hill & Tyson, 2009) daily. I maintain a continuous dialogue with my children about their work, their classes, and their social relationships. While our time is limited, I make the time (often in Mom’s taxi as we drive from the ice rink to the dance studio) to discuss what is happening in school, set high expectations for achievement, and make goals for the future because I have personally experienced the benefits of involved parents and know through my studies the importance of continuous parental involvement with early adolescent children. Creating an open dialogue with adolescents is difficult, especially as they are trying to navigate and create boundaries for privacy. My own experiences as a parent and the strategies I have employed color my perspective of other parents and the strategies they may employ in involving themselves in their adolescent’s social and academic life.

A final major influence on my perceptions and biases regarding parental involvement derives from my professional life as a middle school teacher. Having worked with students in grades five through eight for the past eight years, I have had many positive and negative experiences with early adolescents and their parents. I have witnessed and worked with parents who are barely present at school activities to those whom seem to live in the school. Based upon my personal experience growing up, the most involved parents should have the most successful students and the least involved parents have struggling students, but this is not always the case. Each child is different, every family is different, and differences need to be acknowledged. It would be improper to make conclusions based off my own experiences. As the researcher, I must step out of my own comfort zone, my own experience, and be open to other views and experiences as I prepare to analyze parental involvement levels.
**Researcher Relationship to the Study Group**

As the case with most qualitative studies, in the proposed study I also played an integral role in the development of the school-sponsored programming. As a middle-school teacher at the study site I encouraged parental involvement through invitations and discourse with families. For this study, I served not only as an observer, but as an active participant. The power associated with my position as a respected and tenured teacher in the school encouraged participation in the study as many interviewees explained that one of the reasons for their participation was to assist me in my coursework. Fennell and Arnot (2008) cautioned that researchers must, “be prepared for the personal and professional consequences of turning one’s gaze within” (p. 533). Negative perceptions or feelings toward staff (including myself) may have been revealed during the interview process. Parents may even have held inaccurate information that needed to be corrected. Unlike quantitative work, qualitative research affords the opportunity to clear misconceptions and discuss beliefs in detail. The interaction and discussion between researcher and participants required careful consideration as my personal role in the community had a strong influence with parents.

As a small K-8 school there is great interaction and camaraderie between staff and many of the families at the study site. Prior to the study many families had approached me about my intended research and offered their assistance. Interest and willingness to participate in this study was influenced by the preexisting connection between researcher and families.

**Researcher Relationship to the System**

There are many preconceived notions about charter schools. The site of the intended study was a K-8 public charter school without corporate sponsorship. Many charter schools are
characterized by large numbers of minority students and location in inner cities. The charter school in this study was truly an anomaly among charter schools. It was located in a fairly affluent suburban area where the regular public schools had equally impressive academic programs and success. It was not created to save failing district schools, but to provide choice to parents interested in a new school mission, one of character education, community service, and classical education. Despite taking place in a charter school, this study cannot be classified as a study of charter school parental involvement because the make-up of this particular charter school sets it apart from other charter schools. Likewise, it is important to distinguish that as a charter school, this study site had differences from typical district schools.

Adoption of a unique mission and the school’s student population sets it apart from local district schools. The student body was overwhelmingly white and of Euro-American descent; however, a growing population of 1st and 2nd generation Asian-Indian immigrant existed. Issues surrounding English as a second language recently began to surface in several grade levels, particularly in the middle school. The administration and teaching population in the school was predominantly white Euro-American and had been known to make sweeping generalizations about the immigrant families. This type of marginalization often leads to rationalization of those behaviors by staff (Jupp & Slattery, 2006). Researchers who make broad generalizations or place value on a large group, albeit a minority group, in their study must be willing to analyze how those suppositions were created over time. Conclusions were drawn from the research and care was taken to avoid the incorporation of pre-existing discursive texts already present within the school community of parents and educators being studied.
Research Questions

1. How does middle school parents’ understanding of the needs of early adolescents and the parents’ confidence in being able to meet their children’s needs (parenting self-efficacy) influence their parental involvement practices?

2. What types of communication and interactions do early adolescent parents have with the middle school and how does their communication and interactions with the middle school influence their parental involvement practices?

3. How does participation in school-sponsored programming improve middle school parents’ feelings of self-efficacy and their levels of parental involvement?

Theoretical Framework

Parental involvement researchers examine how parents, students, teachers, and administrators interact with one another and how those interactions affect each disparate group and shape the system as a whole (Brooks, 2009; Comer & Haynes, 1991; DeSimone, 1999; Eberly et al., 2007; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 2011; Ferrara, 2009; Feuerstein, 2010; Griffith, 1996; Grodnick et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Ho & Willms, 1996; Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mattingly et al., 2002; Moll et al., 1992; Pleyvak & Heaston, 2001; Price-Mitchell, 2009; Wiseman, 2010). Each disparate group is a smaller faction of the entire educational system. The physical science of ecology studies the relationships between living organisms and their environment; social ecology studies how individuals and groups interact with one another and their environment. To examine parental involvement with a social-ecological lens means to study how individuals and groups’ (teachers, parents, administrators, and students) beliefs,
interactions, and attitudes influence their actions and how the interactions between individuals and groups influences the entire school or educational system to which they belong.

Within the same school or system disparate groups frequently hold diverse and even contradictory views of the expectations for parental involvement and the forms of communication to be utilized between groups. The disparities in practices and beliefs can counteract efforts made by schools to improve parental involvement (Brooks, 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Ferrara, 2009; Wiseman, 2010). If researchers utilized ecological systems theory in their study of parental involvement in a school or educational system, they would be more able to find commonalities for the groups to build on and identify disparities which they could work to address.

Bronfenbrenner (1979/1994) viewed the social environment as a set of nested structures, much like the famous Russian Matryoshka dolls. Within every large social system, a series of smaller systems exist. Bronfenbrenner named the outermost system the macrosystem and it was broken down to four additional levels, ending with the individual or chronosystem. In the context of parental involvement the outermost macrosystem is represented by political philosophies, economic patterns, cultural values, and social conditions. The next layer, the exosystem, is represented by institutions with power and prestige such as the mass media, community, or government. Next, the microsystem is identified as a setting, a smaller faction of the exosystem, and can include family, peers, and classrooms. The mesosystem is where the microsystems interact. In a study of parental involvement, the mesosystem would include linkages between such settings as parents and students, parents and staff, or staff and students. Interestingly, in an article on his theory, Bronfenbrenner (1979/1994) pointed to the work of Joyce Epstein as an example of his theoretical framework in action. Bronfenbrenner explained
that Epstein’s study of student success when parents were involved in their education, compared with students who parents were not involved supported the claim that parental involvement had more influence on student success than socio-economic status or race. This study of the mesosystem, the links between the microsystems of family and students, illustrated the impact of environment of the education of the child.

Where Bronfenbrenner’s work has been applied to many research topics other than parental involvement, Joyce Epstein’s theory of *overlapping spheres of influence* is directly tied to the study of parental involvement. Epstein cites Bronfenbrenner’s work as the basis for her theory. As a researcher of parental involvement, Epstein’s environment is always a school or school system. She divided the system into three disparate groups or as she titled them, spheres: family, school, and community. At the center of the three spheres lies the student. Epstein contends that the more each sphere interacts with one another, the more the child will benefit. If one examined Epstein’s theory through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s work, each sphere would represent a microsystem and the mesosystem would be the interaction of those microsystems with one another. Empirical studies that utilize this theoretical framework examine how the interactions of the separate microsystems or spheres impact student achievement.

**Application of Bronfenbrenner and Epstein’s Theories**

This qualitative research study explored middle school parent beliefs, their parenting practices, and interactions with the middle school. By understanding parent perspectives regarding the construct of parental involvement, their needs to be more efficient parents, and their feelings about the usefulness of school-sponsored programming, middle schools should be better able to develop and implement programming to support parents and encourage parental
involvement levels. By understanding how each microsystem works, the mesosystem is able to accommodate the needs of each group.

Identifying how specific groups within the school system perceive one another and work with one another provides valuable data from which programming decisions can be made. The interactions and beliefs held by sub-groups in a system influence the functionality of the entire system. Increased communication and collaboration between the sub-groups of families and the school should result in measureable positive outcomes for students according to Epstein’s theory of *overlapping spheres of influence*. This study utilized both Bronfenbrenner and Epstein’s work to focus the study, make meaning of the findings, create scholarly conversation, and reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention in the attempt to improve parental involvement practices with middle school families and staff.
A child’s first teacher is his or her parent, and parents play an essential role in the social, emotional, and cognitive development of their children. A child’s growth, even survival itself, is dependent upon the parents’ level of teaching and care during the infancy stage of development. The round-the-clock attention and involvement required of parents at birth yields over time as children become more independent, however, parental involvement levels drop drastically at a stage of development when parental support is most needed – adolescence (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Ferrara, 2009; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003; Wiseman, 2010). Apart from the infancy stage, children will never experience such rapid change in their physical, emotional, and cognitive states as they will during the developmental stage of adolescence (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Adolescents who lack support systems during this arduous stage of development are at greater risk of not reaching their academic potential (Hill & Tyson, 2009). For this reason, middle schools, which are responsible for the academic growth of peri-adolescent (ages 8-11) and early-adolescent (ages 11-14) students, need to strongly encourage parental involvement during the tumultuous middle school years as a means of promoting student social and academic success.

There is a significant body of research in the field of education on the correlation between parental involvement and student success. When parents take an active role in their children’s education student achievement is increased and student behaviors improve (Epstein, 2011; Ferrara, 2009; Gould, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 005; Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001; Mattingly et al., 2002; Pleyvak & Heaston, 2001; Price-Mitchell, 2009).
Parents, teachers, and administrators are all stakeholders in a child’s education. As the investors in a child’s education all shareholding groups must commit to fostering effective parental involvement in schools if they accept that parental involvement is a proven way to improve the educational experience of students. In theory, involving parents appears to be a simple and feasible approach to increase student academic and social success. In practice, the multi-dimensional nature of parental relationships with teachers, administrators, and students combined with the unique needs of an adolescent population makes effectively incorporating parents in their middle school children’s education a much more complex endeavor.

Despite the known benefits, levels of parental involvement are frequently inconsistent and parental involvement levels significantly decrease as children enter adolescence (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Ferrara, 2009; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003; Wiseman, 2010). Parents have little formal guidance from schools on how to realistically involve themselves in their child’s education and educational stakeholders often have different ideas of what constitutes effective parental involvement. If schools efficiently incorporated parents in their children’s education, the entire learning community could experience the myriad of benefits associated with strong parental involvement including higher levels of student competence (Ferrara, 2009; Gould, 2011; Pleyvak & Heaston, 2001), improved student grades and results on standardized tests (Epstein, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), increased attendance (Ferrara, 2009; Mattingly et al., 2002), lower drop-out and grade retention rates (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mattingly et al., 2002; Pleyvak & Heaston, 2001), better-quality student attitudes and behaviors (Epstein, 2011; Ferrara, 2009; Gould, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mattingly et al., 2002; Price-Mitchell, 2009) and higher rates of participation in advanced level coursework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The benefits for student success are long lasting and apply to all
students regardless of socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, gender or age (Brooks, 2009; Epstein, 2005; Mattingly, 2002; Turney & Kao, 2009; Wiseman, 2010). To best meet the academic and social needs of peri-adolescent and early-adolescent students, middle schools need to provide programming which fosters parental involvement levels.

This literature review will survey parental involvement literature to define parental involvement, examine the specific academic and social needs of middle school aged students, identify what barriers prevent middle school parents from becoming more involved in their children’s education, and discuss what strategies schools can employ to break down barriers to parental involvement and foster parental support for their students. Finally, this literature review will consider the implications of parental involvement research for the field of education and what further research is required.

**Defining Parental Involvement**

The call for increased levels of parental involvement is prevalent in the field of education. The United States federal government mandated specific requirements for schools and school districts regarding parental involvement in the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). As a consequence, American public schools now have a legal obligation to develop parental involvement and are required to substantiate their parental involvement efforts in order to receive federal funding. Many schools have great difficulty meeting the parental involvement goals outlined in NCLB legislation (Epstein, 2005) because it is hard measure quantitatively (Fan & Chen, 2001; Ferrara, 2009; Price-Mitchell, 2009). Fan & Chen (2001) attributed the lack of empirical support to inconsistencies in the definition of parental support. Such inconsistencies, in light of legislation mandating its development demonstrate the need for parents, schools, and
politicians to agree upon an operational definition of parental involvement, so that it can be accurately measured.

Within the same school or system disparate groups frequently hold diverse and even contradictory views of the same principle, which can counteract efforts made towards improvement (Brooks, 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Ferrara, 2009; Wiseman, 2010). Ferrara (2009) found that administrators charged with developing a positive learning environment and fostering harmonious relationships within a school verbally stressed the importance of including parents in the educational process, but failed to follow through with activities and participation opportunities that satisfied all constituents. Administrators and teachers viewed parental support as volunteering for service-based duties (making photocopies, being a room parent, baking treats), attending school sanctioned events, and helping students with reading and homework outside of school (Ferrara, 2009). Parents in the community believed that the invitation to become part of the education of their children would include taking a more active role in educational decision making. No training was provided to parents to become more knowledgeable about issues impacting the school and parents did not know how to participate beyond the role of volunteer and homework assistant. Because each faction failed to move beyond their own narrow definitions of parental involvement, parents in the community became dissatisfied and home-school relations were strained (Ferrara, 2009). Parental involvement levels did not improve because there was no discourse on what defined involvement.

Just as students enter the classroom with different backgrounds and expertise, parents enter the school with the same distinctions. Comer and Haynes (1991) recognized that all parents are unable to participate at the same level and categorized parental involvement into three distinct levels. Level I parents, were the smallest in number, but the most active. These
parents took on leadership and advisory roles in the school, and encouraged other parents to take part in other less time consuming or demanding activities. Level II parents participated in day-to-day volunteer activities of the school, or would join groups like the PTA. Level III parents frequented more general activities like back-to-school nights and school concerts. Recognizing that the parent body had different ideas on how involved they wished or were able to be, the school made sure to provide opportunities for each level of parent. Three inner city schools changed their approach to parental involvement and offered activities for each level of parent growing participation in Level III events from an average of 30 family participants per event to upwards of 250 family participants at each event by the end of the five year longitudinal study (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

In addition to the comfort level of parents, cultural differences also impact the understanding of what constitutes parental involvement and consequently affects participation levels. Wiseman (2010) found that definitions of parental involvement were influenced by socio-economic status (SES). In a two year study, Wiseman discovered that the school administration’s view of parental support as attendance at a school sanctioned events differed greatly from the view of parents from lower SES groups who believed that parental support meant a parent who was employed and put food on the table (Wiseman, 2010). The administrator in Wiseman’s study (2010) was a different race and social class from the parents involved in the study and failed to acknowledge the barriers of race and social class in the community. Definitions of parental involvement are shaped by a wide range of personal experiences and societal influences, making the creation of a concise definition for parental involvement nearly impossible. Turney and Kao (2009) realized that many lower SES families and many immigrant families simply did not know what was expected of them in regards to
support for their children. These families were unable to provide support, because they had no definition of support from which to work. Due to the complex nature of parental involvement, it becomes necessary to employ a multi-faceted construct to define parental involvement (Epstein, 2011; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Price-Mitchell, 2009).

In search of a theoretical model which addresses the multi-dimensional aspects of parental involvement many researchers turn to the work of Joyce Epstein. Epstein’s (1995) theoretical model has been adopted by the National Parent Teacher Association and is currently nationally employed to support the NCLB Title I parent involvement requirements (Smith, 2011). The framework utilizes social networking theory by studying the relationships between individuals or organizations in a group (Price-Mitchell, 2009). Epstein (2011) highlighted what she termed overlapping spheres of influence, in which stakeholder groups have the potential to impact student learning. Moving beyond the view that parental involvement is volunteering to make copies or attend an ice cream social, Epstein (2011) identifies six categories for parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. By explicitly defining activities associated with parental involvement, parents and schools can focus their efforts to improve practices and build relationships taking into account there are different types of involvement and how personal demographics may prevent parents from some forms of involvement.

Critics argue that Epstein’s (1995) model is uni-directional, focusing primarily on ways in which parents involve themselves in their children’s education and to truly understand parental involvement researchers must also study the psychological processes of parents (Price-Mitchell, 2009). Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) developed a comprehensive theoretical framework for parental involvement that focused on three main issues: why parents become
involved in their children’s education, how parents choose which forms of involvement they will employ, and why parental involvement improves student experiences and outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001). Studies conducted using Hoover-Dempsey’s model address the different types of parental involvement and factors behind motivation. Using this type of framework promises to be more than a typology for parental involvement (Fan & Chen, 2001). The use of multi-dimensional frameworks as a basis for examining parental involvement, particularly the needs of middle school parents, leads the way to the identification of additional barriers which schools can then address and attempt to remedy.

Needs of the Middle School Student and Parent

The middle school years coincide with the developmental stages of peri-adolescence (ages 8-11) and adolescence (ages 11-14). These beginning stages of adolescence are fraught with major changes in a child’s biology, cognitive growth, social development, and are frequently marked by renegotiation of family relationships particularly the parent-child dynamic (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hill et al., 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003). Middle school students not only need to learn how to deal with and overcome the multitude of challenges associated with adolescence, they must do so in an environment ill-fit to support their needs. Most American middle schools can be characterized as highly structured organizations that emphasize the importance of conformity and adherence to rules (Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003). The rigidity of the middle school environment opposes the adolescent developmental need to challenge authority and assert their individuality (Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003) making the middle school institution another challenge for peri-adolescent and early-adolescent children to overcome.
Educational researchers Eccles and Harold (1993) surveyed reports detailing specific problems facing early-adolescents during their middle school years. The literature revealed that middle school students suffer from increasing levels of school failure, growing drop-out rates, higher numbers of delinquent behavior or dangerous decision making, and mounting cases of youth violence (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Combined with the knowledge that middle school students’ academic needs differ significantly from those of elementary and high school students (Marchant et al., 2001), the responsibilities and needs middle schools need to address with their students are overwhelming.

There is a large body of educational research supporting the theory that parental involvement supports student academic and social success. Parent involvement not only supports academic aims, but correlates with decreased instances of behavior problems (Hill et al., 2004). Additionally, reduced behavior problems result in improved academic success (Hill et al., 2004), therefore schools looking to reduce problem behaviors and increase student academic outcomes should be working to increase, or at least maintain, parental involvement levels during the middle school years. Unfortunately, middle school parental involvement levels continue to drop leading schools to question, what is preventing parents from becoming involved in their children’s education?

**Barriers to Parental Involvement**

The creation of national legislation mandating the inclusion of parental involvement programming and strategies in public schools clearly underscores the relevance for further study into the barriers for parental involvement. A review of parental involvement literature reveals that many barriers to parental involvement spring from misconceptions or faulty perceptions on
the part of stakeholders, poor communication between stakeholder groups, and cultural
differences within the community.

One’s understanding of a construct often determines their behavior or actions regarding
the construct. Ferrara (2009) argued that the myopic vision of stakeholders severely hindered
parental involvement. Ferrara (2009) found that an unfriendly barrier was formed in the district
she studied because many staff members viewed parent interactions as intrusive. Eccles &
Harold (1993) found that many parents perceive teachers and schools as being hostile towards
them. The teachers did not take into account that parents might have been unfamiliar with the
school protocol and their failure to make appointments, poor communication skills, and tendency
to repeatedly ask the same question were a result of not understanding protocol and
environmental factors, and not meant as disrespect. Parents reported they felt uncomfortable
entering the school and interactions between school and homes were strained (Ferrara, 2009).
Brooks (2009) cautioned that all schools should be cognizant of how parents perceive them.
Brooks (2009) found that schools typically isolate themselves from the community, yet were
surprised when parents refused to attend open-houses and parent-teacher conferences. Ferrara
(2009) also noted that schools tended to work on a deficit model, focusing on what parent aren’t
doing, instead of what the parents are doing. Misconceptions held by stakeholders in a school
community seriously impact the ability to involve parents in schools and breeds a culture of
mistrust (Brooks, 2009; Ferrara, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009).

The educational community frequently employs the proverb “it takes a village to raise a
child” in discussing school practices. This philosophy assumes that through collaborative work
and open communication among the stakeholders in a community the needs of the child will be
met. Price-Mitchell (2009) argued that greater communication between stakeholders led to greater opportunity for successful outcomes with students. Knowledge, trust, and respect between stakeholders can be developed through open communication. Many parents of middle school students report that schools don’t effectively communicate with them, therefore preventing their support (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Fauerstein, 2009). When stakeholders understand, have faith in, and value one another they will be more likely to communicate and initiate contact with one another (Brooks, 2009; Ferrara, 2009; Pleyvak & Heaston, 2001; Price-Mitchell, 2009).

Miscommunication between stakeholders can often be attributed to lack of knowledge. Researchers have found that parents in their studies did not know how to appeal to administration and teachers with their concerns, so they remained quiet, alienating themselves from school leadership (Brooks, 2009; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009). Ferrara (2009) learned that as students progressed through school the parents relied more on students to share pertinent information regarding school events. Relying on adolescents to receive important information about the school can be problematic as Wiseman (2010) discovered in her work with eighth grade students. Wiseman (2010) observed that adolescent students frequently took on the role of a gatekeeper, providing and withholding information from the school to parents as the students saw fit. By children filtering the flow of information from school to home, communication is damaged. Parental involvement can be hindered because parents do not have the knowledge needed to make decisions and become involved in their child’s schooling.
Open lines of communication are crucial for fostering parental involvement in school communities. Schools need to critically examine the methods employed for communication to ensure they are fully functional and addressing the needs of all members of the community. Ferrara (2009) found that secondary schools in her study were relying on the schools’ websites to relay information to the community members; however, a significant percentage of the community did not have computer access. Additionally, out of the community members with computer access, many had difficulty accessing and navigating the site (Ferrara, 2009). Pleyvak and Heaston (2009) and Brooks (2009) found that the majority of communication in schools came from the top-down and suggested that by taking a bottom-up format more members of the community would become involved. Simply providing information is not communicating. School communities must take strides to ensure that communication forms are accessible to all and are utilized in a way which encourages involvement.

The cultural differences of community members also have a great impact on levels of parental involvement in schools. Cultural differences include what Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) referred to as life contexts, the skills, time, and knowledge levels which motivate parents to become involved in the children’s schooling. Factors which negatively impacted parents’ ability to become involved included work schedules (Brooks, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Turney & Kao, 2009; Wiseman, 2010), language barriers (Brooks, 2009; Ferrara, 2009; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Turney & Kao, 2009; Wiseman, 2010), parent history of negative school experiences (DeSimone, 1999; Eccles & Harold, 1993), and socio-economic status (Brooks, 2009; Ferrara, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Turney & Kao, 2009). Parent’s personal level of schooling and access to professional support systems also negatively impacted parental involvement levels (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Turney & Kao, 2009).
Turney & Kao (2009) also discovered that two parent families had higher levels of parent involvement and that the families of female students were significantly more involved in their child’s schooling than the families of male students. Every student’s family has its own set of demographic factors that impact their ability to participate in their children’s education. Schools and community members must learn ways to address the cultural factors impacting parental involvement if they wish to increase participation levels in their community.

Parents of middle school students face additional barriers unknown to elementary and high school parents. The increased size of middle schools makes contact with individual teachers more difficult than when their students attended smaller, contained elementary schools (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003). The location of middle schools outside of the local neighborhood to regional venues also decreases middle school parental involvement (Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003). School provided opportunities for involvement also change as students progress from elementary schools. During the elementary years, parents are often invited into the classroom and when students enter middle schools this type of involvement ends and parents are only invited to attend infrequent school activities such as seasonal concerts and plays (Hill & Tyson, 2009). At the elementary level parents have a better understanding of pedagogy and feelings of efficacy regarding school content. As students enter middle school, parents report feelings of incompetency and lack of content knowledge needed to assist their children (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hill et al., 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Finally, middle school parents report conflict with their children as another barrier to their involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003; Marchant et al., 2001). Student’s developmental need for autonomy frequently does not mix with well-meaning
parent’s attempts to involve themselves in their children’s lives. The resulting conflict often
causes parents to avoid involvement altogether.

The barriers to parental involvement are numerous, yet not impossible to overcome.
School communities have difficulty in addressing the multitude of barriers to parental
involvement because they often take a uni-directional approach instead of a multi-dimensional
based approach to encouraging parent involvement will fail to meet objectives and what is
needed is a full cultural shift in schools. A cultural shift can be achieved through programming,
collaborative work, and education for all stakeholder groups. The current lack of professional
development for administrators and teachers (Brooks, 2009; Ferrara, 2009; Pleyvak & Heaston,
2001) and educational programming for parents (Brooks, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005;
Turney & Kao, 2009) prolongs the current state of weak parental involvement in schools.
Professional development and programming which encourages stakeholders to take an active
role in the construction of new ideas is needed to address the parental involvement problem in
schools (Brooks, 2009; Epstein, 2002005; Ferrara, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Pleyvak

**Breaking Down the Barriers to Parental Involvement**

To bridge the gaps and breakdown the barriers which hinder parental involvement in
schools a multitude of strategies and programming aimed to incorporate all stakeholders in the
educational community (administration, teachers, and parents) is required. As the educational
leaders of their school, administrators have a responsibility to cultivate a welcoming culture that
values the input of all stakeholders (Brooks, 2009; Ferrara, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey, 2005).
Administrators need to empower teachers (Ferrara, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey, 2005; Price-Mitchell, 2009) by providing professional development centered on parental involvement. Administrators need to show all constituents that relationship building and communication is a top priority and can accomplish this through setting clear goals for improved communications, regular visits to classrooms, and public advocacy for school improvements that benefit all members of the community (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Developing and strengthening the relationship between teachers and parents is another way to break down barriers. Eberly, Joshi, and Konzal (2007) found that teachers reported having a difficult time interacting with families of a different race and social class than their own and identified lack of teacher-training as a major contributor to their poor teacher-family relations. This is particularly distressing considering Griffith (2006) observed that teachers who perceive their students’ parents as being actively involved in their education receive better grades than students whose parents were not perceived to be involved in their children’s education. Moll et al. (1992) sought to break down barriers between white, middle-class teachers and Mexican-Americans through community building. Employing the help of ethnographers and teachers, the group went to the homes of Mexican immigrants to learn family histories, concerns, and perceptions of parental involvement in the American school system. The research provided insight into immigrant experiences and differences experienced by marginalized populations. The researchers found that the relationships formed when teachers visited immigrant families in their homes was invaluable. Collaboration beyond the school walls can, “become the basis for exchange of knowledge about family or school matters, reducing the insularity of the classrooms, and contributing to the academic content and lessons” (Moll et al., 1997, p.139).
Within the school walls teachers can develop lessons and learning activities which incorporate parental involvement. Newman (2011) created a program of weekly letter writing with 5th grade students to keep parents informed and abreast of happenings in the curriculum and the school. A seemingly simple activity had a multitude of positive academic and social outcomes. Academically, students learned the skill of letter writing, participated in authentic writing experiences, and reflected on their cross-curricular academic progress in the weekly letters (Newman, 2011). Socially, parents were kept abreast of important information affecting their child and felt a door had been opened for communication between school and home (Newman, 2011). Additionally, researchers observed that when teachers reached out to parents, the parents were more apt to become involved in their child’s education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Teacher invitations for assistance coupled with specific suggestions on how parents could assist their children to effectively support their students and what types of assistance are among the most beneficial strategies to building parental involvement (Epstein, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Finally, teacher invitations to parents helped breakdown the often hierarchal relationship between teachers and parents (Price-Mitchell, 2009). When teachers actively seek help or support from parents, teachers relinquish their role as expert and sole authority on teaching, which welcomes parents to develop a positive teacher-parent partnership.

Increasing parental involvement necessitates equal involvement and commitment from all stakeholder groups. To ensure better and more productive parental involvement there are several strategies parents can employ. First, parents need to advocate for themselves (Brooks, 2009; Ferrara, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009) by sharing their concerns and learning the protocols for communication with the school. Parents need to inform schools of potential barriers for their involvement (work schedules, language, education, etc.) so the school and parent can look to
proactively address those issues (Brooks, 2009; Ferrara, 2009; Wiseman, 2010). Parents should also try to participate in as many school related activities as possible. Finally, academic socialization, keeping informed of what is happening in the schools, checking in with students, and letting children know that parents care about their education are important features of parental involvement (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Middle school students whose parents speak with them on a regular basis about the importance of school, their courses, and their peer relationships had better rates of academic success than students who did not engage in regular conversations with their children. Hill and Tyson’s (2009) research showed that middle school children of parents who employed academic socialization strategies as their means of parental involvement had better outcomes than any other type of parental involvement.

Summary

This literature review supports the call to foster effective parental involvement with parents of middle school students. The research clearly illustrates the correlation between student success and family involvement, yet due to a myriad of reasons, many parents do not provide constant or effective backing when it comes to their children’s education. Sadly, parental involvement levels decline drastically as students enter the turbulent middle school years, a time when parental support is greatly needed. Barriers to successful parental involvement are numerous including the lack of an accepted definition from which to base analysis, misconceptions among stakeholders, poor communication between stakeholders, cultural differences within the school community, and a lack of programming and professional development on the subject. To address the myriad of problems regarding parental involvement a multi-faceted approach is recommended. Educational stakeholders must work together to
address and break down the barriers to parental involvement to improve parental involvement and ultimately help students be more successful.

A host of strategies have been suggested by researchers to improve middle school parental involvement; yet, few studies actually examine the effect of the interventions on the different groups of educational stakeholders. School-sponsored parent workshops are a stratagem employed to build home-school collaboration, support parents in their work with students, and improve student social and academic outcomes of students (Epstein, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). To better understand the effectiveness of school sponsored parent workshops, research is needed to assess how such workshops improve middle school parents’ understanding and levels of involvement. The findings of a study on middle school parents’ beliefs and practices before and after participation in school-sponsored programming can aid schools in developing effective presentations to encourage parental involvement.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study was to assess middle school parents’ understanding of parental involvement and determine if the implementation of school-sponsored workshops helps to better define parental involvement expectations, improve communication between schools and families, and increase parent involvement levels and parents’ feelings of efficacy in working with their adolescent children. Through interviews before the intervention, observation of the participants during the intervention, and interviews following the intervention, the researcher sought to answer the following questions:

1. How does middle school parents’ understanding of the needs of early adolescents and the parents’ confidence in being able to meet their children’s needs (parenting self-efficacy) influence their parental involvement practices?

2. What types of communication and interactions do early adolescent parents have with the middle school and how does their communication and interactions with the middle school influence their parental involvement practices?

3. How does participation in school-sponsored programming improve middle school parents’ feelings of self-efficacy and their levels of parental involvement?

Choice of Paradigm

The paradigm employed by a researcher shapes their work. This study on middle school parents and their parental involvement choices required the researcher to study individual parent perspectives and compare them to the perspectives of other parents, to find common themes
among the population. The paradigm employed for this study is classified as constructivist-interpretivist (Ponterotto, 2005). Using an idiographic perspective that acknowledges that individuals are unique and complex, the researcher sought common themes from a variety of middle school parents that schools can then utilize to build programming better designed to accommodate families. Understanding of the problem of middle school parent involvement occurred as the participants and researcher joined in interactive dialogue and interpretation (Ponterotto, 2005). The researcher’s interaction with subjects was of utmost importance and required trust and rapport, so subjects would feel free to express their true feelings and thoughts. Only through un-coerced data collection will schools be able to make informed decisions regarding programming to foster parental involvement levels of middle school families.

**Research Design**

Parental involvement research takes both qualitative and quantitative forms, but for this study a qualitative approach was selected to provide more depth and understanding of why middle school parent involvement declines and if the specific intervention strategy of school-sponsored programming was effective in supporting parents and increasing levels of involvement. Studying the effectiveness of specific parental involvement strategies enhances the parental involvement knowledge base and furthers the work of parental involvement researchers (Fan & Chen, 2001; Ferrara, 2009; Pleyvak & Heaston, 2001; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Demspey, 2005). Results of this work can also be used to inform schools, teachers, and families on how to better meet the needs of students. Through a general inductive study consisting of interviews and observations, the study aimed to uncover general themes, concerns, and best practices that can be further explored and implemented to support students, parents, teachers, and administrators.
Research Tradition

This study examined how several different factors (parent interactions with school, parent perceptions, and parent feelings of self-efficacy) influenced parental involvement practices. After developing an initial awareness of the influence of those factors on middle school parents, the study analyzed how those school-sponsored programs influenced interactions, perceptions, and parent’s feelings of self-efficacy. School-sponsored workshops are a common recommendation among parental involvement researchers (Brooks, 2009; Epstein, 2011; Ferrara, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001; Pleyvak & Heaston, 2001; Price-Mitchell, 2009; Walker et al., 2005) to improve parental involvement levels. Data for this study was collected during semi-structured interviews with parents before and after the intervention. The aim of the study was to better understand what induces middle school parents to become involved in their children’s social and academic lives and how schools can assist parents in effectively supporting their early adolescent children.

Thomas (2006) identified three main purposes for employing a general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative data:

1. to condense extensive and varied text data into a brief, summary format;
2. to establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data and to ensure that these links are both transparent (able to be demonstrated to others) and defensible (justifiable given the objectives of the research); and
3. to develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the text data (p.238).
The purpose of this study of middle school parental involvement aligned well with the study methodology detailed by Thomas (2006). The study findings emerged from themes identified in the data and was not constrained by limitations of other more defined qualitative research models (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000; Sandelowski, 2000; Thomas, 2006). First, by employing a general inductive approach the large amount of data from interviews with subjects before and after the intervention, as well as researcher observations of the participants at the intervention was compressed and summarized. Next, the study established links between communication and interactions, parent perceptions, and feelings of efficacy with parental involvement levels. After the intervention, the data was analyzed again to distinguish how school-sponsored programming influenced parent perceptions, home-school interactions, and feelings of efficacy.

**Justification for the General Inductive Approach**

In an effort to achieve a deeper understanding of issues influencing middle school parent involvement levels and practices, this study shares characteristics aligned with both phenomenological and case studies, but cannot be definitively classified by either methodology. Phenomenological studies describe “the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p.76) and usually include between five and twenty-five subjects (Creswell, 2013). As parents of middle school students, the subjects in this study all shared the experience of parenting early adolescents. Furthermore, the study examined how parent attitudes and behaviors were influenced by participation in a school-sponsored program. The first set of interviews for this study, before the intervention took place, aligned with a phenomenological study as it sought to find the “essence” (Creswell, 2013) of what middle school parents thought and how they acted regarding parental involvement. The second phase of the study, the intervention in which observations by the researcher of the
subjects took place and the subsequent follow-up interviews, aligned more closely with a case study methodology. Case study research provides an in-depth focus on a specific real-life situation, with an individual or small group of subjects, over time, and through a variety of data collection techniques such as observations, interviews, documents, and reports (Creswell, 2013). Case study research usually centers on one to four subjects (Creswell, 2013). The observation of study subjects during the intervention and subsequent interviews was similar in many respects to the case study approach, but differences in the number of subjects being studied (eleven subjects) and the focus on the shared experiences of the group in the first phase of the research differentiated this particular study from a traditional case study.

The general inductive approach to data analysis is considered to not be as strong as some other approaches to analyzing qualitative data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Sandelowski, 2000; Thomas, 2006). More focused methodologies such as ethnography, case study, phenomenology, or grounded theory have more rigid guidelines and expectations for data analysis. In many forms, the method employed shapes how the researcher analyzes the data. In a general inductive approach, the researcher allows the data to speak for itself and is not encumbered by parameters of other methodologies. In many ways, a general inductive approach to analysis can be viewed as a hybrid of other qualitative analysis methodologies or as Sandelowski (2000) suggests, general inductive studies can have “overtones” of other approaches.

The multi-method approach utilized by general inductive researchers opens the possibilities for analysis. General inductive researchers firmly believe that analysis happens both during the data collection (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000) and in the dissemination of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000; Sandelowski, 2000; Thomas, 2006; VanMaanen, 1979). While analyzing data,
general inductive researchers are continually modifying their findings as they acquire new insight (Sadelowski, 2000). General inductive researchers generate categories and explanations for phenomenon gradually from the data (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). Unlike quantitative research which tends to describe social structures, general inductive research describes the unfolding of social processes (VanMaanen, 1979). Additionally, where more defined qualitative approaches analyze for discovery like grounded theory or utilize a meaning-focused approach to data analysis like phenomenological studies, general inductive research analysis focuses on content and discovery. Discovery in a general inductive approach study consists of the identification of patterns and connections, as well as meaning for the participants (Fossey et al., 2002).

**Participants**

This research study explored how feelings of parental efficacy influenced and shaped middle school parents’ parental involvement choices. The sampling strategy was criterion based. Participants had to be parents of middle school aged students and willing to be interviewed before and after attendance at a school-sponsored workshop to be selected.

The interview and data collection process intended to uncover common themes among the participants in regards to their understanding of what constituted parental involvement, what specific issues and concerns influenced middle school aged students, and how parents viewed collaboration efforts with school and administration at the middle school level. To accomplish this, the study employed a sample size of eleven parent participants. The general inductive approach was amenable to a variety of sampling strategies (Sandelowski, 2000); however, maximum variation sampling fit particularly well with the general inductive approach and this
study. Of the sample participants, parents representing each grade level (grades six through eight), minority family representation, and families that had additional children in elementary or high school were recruited. By selecting participants who represented each of the criterions mentioned, the researcher hoped the data collected would be more representative of the experience of the entire middle school parent population and could be transferred to other middle school settings and work with parental involvement levels at different grade levels.

**Recruitment and Access**

The study site was a K-8 public charter school where the researcher had been employed as a middle school teacher for over six years. Participants for the study were approached and recruited after a public request at the school’s curriculum night in the fall (See Appendix A for Curriculum Night Speech). Following the short presentation, a follow-up letter was sent to all middle school parents (See Appendix B for Parent Recruitment Letter). The communication asked families interested in participating to answer a quick survey regarding the age and grade level of their student, how many children they had and the age of those children, their level of parental involvement, and some basic demographic information (race, socio-economic level, languages spoken, highest level of education obtained). The letter also included information informing parents of their rights as participants throughout the entire process. Finally, participants were selected who represented different perspectives in the parent population. As an incentive for participation, and as an expression of gratitude for their participation, interviewees were provided a five dollar gift card to a local coffee shop after participation in the two interview sessions, attendance at the school-sponsored programming event, and their review of the interview transcripts from the two individual interview sessions.
Protection of Human Subjects

As participants in a study of middle school parental involvement, each human subject’s treatment throughout the course of the study must be consistent, equitable, and beneficent. According to the National Institutes for Health (NIH) researchers working with human subjects need to ensure 1) respect for the person, 2) beneficence, and 3) justice (National Institutes for Health, 2011). The researcher must ensure that every participant clearly understands why they have been selected, why the study is taking place, and their role in the study. Each participant needs to be informed of their role in the study and must agree to participate based on their understanding of the intended study’s design. Participants were educated on foreseeable risks and benefits of participation and were able to decide if they would like to partake in the study through the provision of the Letter of Informed Consent (See Appendix C for Letter of Informed Consent). Beneficence deals with treatment of the participants during the course of the study. As outlined in Protecting Human Research Participants (NIH, 2011) human subject research studies should 1) do no harm and 2) maximize possible benefits to the participant while minimizing the possible harm to the participant. The chance and extent for potential harm to the participant was considered to be less than the harm one would encounter in their daily life or would experience during routine physical or psychological exams (NIH, 2011). It was believed that no out-of-the-ordinary discomfort would be experienced by participation in the study and therefore minimal risk was associated with involvement. Finally, care was taken by the researcher to ensure fair distribution of benefits and harm to members of the study and special attention was paid to any participant representing a marginalized or afflicted group.
IRB Approval

This research study could not commence until approval had been obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Northeastern University to conduct a study of human subjects (See Appendix A for IRB Letter of Approval). This study qualified for an expedited review where only one member of the IRB reviewed the proposed study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) because it did not include at-risk populations and posed minimal risk to participants. To obtain approval, the researcher submitted a detailed plan of the study, an example of the Letter of Informed Consent, a plan of how to keep participants informed throughout the study process, and an outline of questions to be used in interviews. The researcher employed a conversational approach (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) in interviews and was able to provide the IRB with guiding questions and potential follow-up questions for the individual interviews. Additionally, the researcher spoke to potential ethical issues including relationship to the participants and professional role at the study site. As a parent of middle school aged students and teacher of middle school aged students the researcher felt able to identify with parents and staff, yet some parent participants may have viewed the researcher as an authority and felt compelled to participate or alter their responses to “please” the researcher. The researcher took care throughout the research process to remind participants to speak their truth and to feel free to ask questions at any time. The researcher also took care to not allow personal biases or experiences to cloud or shape participant experiences.

Informed Consent

Parents chosen to be participants in this study were human subjects and were treated as autonomous agents. By providing information about the study processes and clearly explaining
the expectations for subject participation, each participant was asked to sign the IRB approved Letter of Informed Consent. The letter consisted of several sections detailing specific responsibilities and roles related to the study. It was written in layman terms, so all participants could understand the information and each participant was provided contact information to reach the researcher, at any point when they may have had additional questions or concerns. The letter specifically addressed: why participants were selected; why the study took place; what they would be asked to do; where it would take place and an approximation of the time commitment required; a discussion of any risks/discomfort; an outline of possible personal benefits for participation; a detailed explanation of who would view the information gathered and how pseudonyms and codes would be used to protect their identities; an explanation of how participation was voluntary and could be stopped at any time if the participant so desired; contact information for the researcher and contact information for the researcher’s supervisors (Northeastern University) for deeper concerns; and information about potential payment or costs associated with being part of the study (See Appendix C for Letter of Informed Consent).

Data Collection

A combination of semi-structured interviews before and after the intervention, as well as researcher observations during the intervention served as the main data sources for this study. Semi-structured interviews took place between the researcher and each of the individual participants. Interviews were approximately 45-60 minutes in length and the conducted at one of the charter school’s auxiliary buildings. Each interview covered a specific topic (parental understanding of parental involvement, parent perceptions of collaboration with the school, feelings of efficacy before the intervention, feelings of efficacy after the intervention) and the researcher presented the same set of guiding questions to all participants, however, because the
interviewer utilized a responsive interviewing style (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) follow-up questions and discussion varied among the participants.

The first interview session was a cultural interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) where the researcher examined how norms, rules, and values of the participants influenced their beliefs regarding parental involvement and their parental involvement choices. The second interview was conducted after the intervention was more topical (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) in nature, where the researcher sought specific facts and detailed descriptions of how the intervention had changed or not changed their understandings, beliefs, and parental involvement practices and parent perceptions regarding the value of school-programming. During the interviews the researcher audio-recorded the session (after receiving participant approval) and kept physical notes that were accessed during the transcription process. All data collected was stored and kept confidentially as outlined below.

**Data Storage**

Protecting the confidentiality of participants is of utmost importance in any research of human subjects. To ensure study participants anonymity pseudonyms were used throughout the entire process. Interview notes and recordings were stored in a locked cabinet and on a password protected file on the researcher’s computer. All notes and recordings were also destroyed at the conclusion of the study. The researcher was the only person with access to the notes, recordings, and transcriptions of the interviews and observations.

**Data Analysis**

General inductive researchers use data to make meaning and while general inductive researchers may utilize a variety of methods in collecting data the analysis begins with
identification of major themes and ends with the discussion of how the themes intersect and form patterns. Pope, Ziebland, and Mays (2000) outlined five stages of data analysis in their work. Stage one is familiarization, collecting, rereading, and being comfortable with the data. The Second stage is the identification of thematic frameworks, where themes are identified through close reading of the material and creating codes. The third stage is the indexing stage, where codes are grouped and cross-referenced across larger themes. The fourth stage, charting, seeks to link codes to themes and the final stage mapping and interpreting, is when the researcher discusses the connections between codes and themes and possibly begins to generate theory. Attride-Stirling (2001) suggested a similar strategy for data analysis, her work consisted of three stages: 1) breakdown of the text where themes are identified through coding and networks are constructed; 2) exploration of how the networks connect; and 3) integration and exploration where networks are interpreted and patterns discerned.

The student researcher employed a data analysis strategy similar to those outlined by Pope, Ziebland, & Mays (2000) and Attride-Stirling (2001). After the first session of interviews data was transcribed and coded. Coding strategies took several forms based upon the information received; however, additional coding sessions helped the researcher fine tune the data (Saldana, 2013). During the intervention, field notes were taken as the researcher observed the study participants at the intervention. The insights gained through the observation added further understanding, and more codes and themes were developed as a result of the observation. Finally, the second session interviews were transcribed and coded. Codes and themes from the initial interviews and from the intervention observations were utilized and new codes and themes were created based on the data collected.
Through each step of the study, initial interviews, intervention, secondary interviews, codes and themes emerged. Awareness was developed with each inspection of the data. During the coding stage basic themes developed and were categorized into organizing themes and then finally into global themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Analysis explored how the themes existed and related among the participants and their perspective before and after the intervention. This analysis process discerned patterns among the experiences and perceptions of parents to the intervention. The interpretation of these connections can be used to inform parents, schools, and policy makers of ways to best meet the needs of middle school parents and provide effective parental involvement opportunities for parents of early adolescent children.

**Trustworthiness and Validity**

Necessary measures to be taken in the course of a research study are those involving the assurance of both trustworthiness and validity. Contrary to quantitative research where the researcher must evidence the reliability of the study processes employed, the qualitative researcher is charged with substantiating the dependability of the study processes and data analysis (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). The trustworthiness of a human subject research study is determined by the reader’s trust and confidence in the researcher’s accurate depiction of study processes. To ensure trustworthiness in this study of middle school parents, several strategies including the sharing of researcher bias (Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2013); member checks (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002; Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2012); and the use of thick, rich detail (Creswell, 2012; Creswell 2013) and low-inference descriptors (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002) were employed. Validity, which comes in the form of internal and external validity (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994); was engaged through the use of triangulation (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002; Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2013); coding
and re-coding of data (Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2013); researcher reflexivity (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002); and external audits (Creswell, 2012).

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative researchers frequently are immersed in the community of study (Creswell, 2013) and diligently work towards high levels of objectivity, acknowledging when subjectivity comes into play. As a well-known middle school teacher at the study site, a parent of middle school aged students, and the researcher in this study, it was important to recognize and identify any preconceived notions held or biases towards the study or the participants for this study to be trustworthy. While utilizing a conversational approach to interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), the researcher had a responsibility to clearly delineate between what was personal experience and professional experience, and what was observed when conducting interviews, observing the intervention, and analyzing the data. Open communication with participants and in the analysis increased the trustworthiness of the study.

Another strategy used to improve this qualitative study’s level of trustworthiness was to provide thick, rich detail of interviews and observation (Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2013), as well as to provide low-inference descriptions (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). By providing rich detail, the reader is able to transfer their understanding of the study and its findings to other contexts or situations (Creswell, 2013). Low-inference descriptors (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002) include verbatim or direct quotations from subjects that facilitate the reader’s understanding and experience of the participant’s world. Through the use of thorough descriptions, the researcher attempted to recreate the experience and beliefs of middle school parents that readers can identify with and transfer to other middle school settings.
Finally, member checks were employed to ensure trustworthiness in the study. Member checks allowed study participants to view the transcripts of their interviews to certify that the data to be analyzed was correct and provided interviewees an opportunity to further clarify their comments. Validation by the participants that the data collected was accurate added to the study’s overall level of trustworthiness.

**Validity**

Qualitative research experts identify two types of validity: internal and external (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Internal validity is associated with the truth value of the study and determines if the findings make sense (Miles & Huberman, 1994). External validity deals with the transferability of the study and answers the question, can these findings be transferred to other settings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In efforts to increase the validity of this research study the following strategies were engaged: triangulation, coding and re-coding, reflexivity, and an external audit.

In its simplest terms, triangulation is the use of multiple types of data. Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh (2002) referred to the use of triangulation as structural corroboration, a further support for validity of the study. In this study, triangulation took two forms: triangulation of data through the use of multiple interviews and participants, and triangulation of methods through the use of interviews and field observations. Once data was collected and deemed trustworthy through member checks, the researcher proceeded to code and then re-code the data. Multiple sessions of coding data added to the validity of the study findings (Creswell, 2012, 2013). Since researcher bias could be construed as a source of invalidity, reflexivity of the researcher (the
ability of the researcher to view their biases and role in an objective manner) negated any taint of invalidity (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002).

An external audit is when a researcher employs an outside source to analyze the study and validate its conclusions (Creswell, 2012). This study as part of a doctoral dissertation was scrutinized by many sources other than the researcher. As part of the program of study at Northeastern University, the dissertation advisor and a small group of readers provided elements of an external audit as the study progressed to assist the first-time researcher. Triangulation, series of coding, researcher reflexivity, and external audits enhanced the overall validity of this research project on middle school parents and parental involvement.
CHAPTER IV

REPORT OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to better understand how middle school parents’ perceptions of parental involvement and their interactions with the middle school influenced their parental involvement practices. Using a general inductive approach, eleven parents of middle school aged children from the James Renshaw Charter School (JRCS) in Renshaw, Massachusetts (pseudonyms were employed for all participants and locations) were interviewed on their parental involvement beliefs, practices, and interactions with the school. Following the first round of interviews, parent participants attended a school-sponsored workshop on social media and cyber-bullying. In subsequent weeks following the school-sponsored presentation, a second round of interviews took place in which interviewees discussed the positive and negative attributes of school-sponsored presentations and how programming influenced their parental involvement beliefs and practices. Parental involvement researchers have suggested a host of strategies to improve parental involvement levels of middle school parents; yet, few studies actually examine the effect of specific strategies on participants. This study’s focus on the utilization of school-sponsored programming with middle school families aimed to better understand parent perceptions about parenting, school communication, and the value of programming for middle school parents.

The Participants

The town of Renshaw, Massachusetts was a predominantly white, middle-class suburb equidistant between the major cities of Boston, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island. In
2009, a well-known national publication named Renshaw, Massachusetts as one of the “Ten Best Towns for Families” citing affordable homes, good jobs, ease of transportation, and top-rated schools among the many positive town attributes. The town was home to six elementary schools, three middle schools, two high schools (one district and one regional vocational high school), and a K-8 charter school. The James Renshaw Charter School (JRCS) was founded as one of Massachusetts’ first charter schools in 1995 by a small group of parents and teachers who wished to provide another public schooling option for the residents of Renshaw, Massachusetts that focused on the core principles (pillars) of: character education, community service, classical education, and parents as primary educators. The school opened serving grades K-4 with 144 students and a staff of 20 in 1995 and had grown to serve 450 students in grades K-8 with over 60 faculty members for the 2013-2014 school year.

Families interested in enrolling their children at JRCS were required to complete and submit an application form for each child they wished to enroll. Open spots were filled by lottery once a year, with siblings of currently enrolled students receiving first priority, followed by residents of the town of Renshaw and finally, residents of surrounding towns. Kindergarten was the school’s biggest entry point and admission to the school in the elementary years following Kindergarten was very rare. The waitlist for students hoping to enter the school averaged over 300 students annually. While there were few open spots past Kindergarten in the elementary grades, a higher number of openings became available in the middle school division. Historically, the two biggest entry points for new students to the school were Kindergarten and fifth grade. Of the eleven parents interviewed for this study, six families entered JRCS in Kindergarten, one family entered in fourth grade, three entered in fifth grade, and one family joined the school when their oldest child was in the seventh grade. Additionally, nine of the
eleven families were residents of the town of Renshaw and two families traveled from neighboring communities to attend the charter school. Interestingly, both of the non-Renshaw resident families joined the charter school in the middle school years (fifth and seventh grade respectively) further illustrating the difficulty for non-Renshaw residents to gain admission to the school. While the charter school was still an equal opportunity public school, the application and waiting process for admission to the school was more time consuming than enrollment procedures for the local district schools and required a higher level of involvement on the part of parents. Parents interviewed for this study, as parents in the charter school community, conducted some sort of research on schooling options for their children and sought the charter school instead of their district school. The very act of choosing to enroll in a charter school is a strong indicator of increased levels of parental involvement in the academic lives of the participants’ children.

**Race and Socio-Economic Status**

According to the 2013 JRCS Annual Report, the charter school demographics closely mirrored those of the town of Renshaw. The school was predominantly white (78%). The reported minority groups at the charter school included: Asians (15%), families belonging to two or more races (4%), Hispanics (2%), and African-Americans (1%). The lack of ethnic diversity in the school was also paralleled by the participants in the study that included nine white women, one white male, and one Hispanic woman. The socio-economic status of students and their families at the charter school ran heavily towards middle and upper-middle class. Only 3% of the school’s population received free and reduced lunch, and all eleven interviewees identified themselves as middle class when considering socio-economic status.
The ability to have a stay-at-home parent with school aged children has become a luxury to many American families. According to a 2010 report, less than one in three American families (28.7%) have a stay-at-home parent. Considering more than half of the population (52.6%) had a stay-at-home parent only a generation before (Dionne, 2012), it appears that the economic demands of modern life necessitates a two-income family. In sharp contrast to the national figures, five of the parents interviewed for this study were stay-at-home parents. Two parents worked part-time and four worked full-time. Additionally, all eleven participants were highly educated. Five participants earned a Bachelor’s degree, five participants earned Master’s degrees, and one participant had earned a doctoral degree. Of the stay-at-home parents, one parent had a Bachelor’s degree, three had Master’s degrees, and one had a doctoral degree. The ability for families to have a stay-at-home parent and the participants’ high levels of education are evidence of the economic stability of these families and their commitment to education.

**Marital Status**

While socio-economic status and level of education are considerable benefits to parents, each of the participants in this study were also part of a two-parent household. All eleven participants were married. The lack of single parent household representation may be attributed to the fact that single parents did not have the time or resources to participate in the study, where parents from two-parent households and stay-at-home parents may have had more availability and time to dedicate to participation in the two interviews and workshop attendance.

**Parenting Experience**

Regardless of their wealth, level of education, or marital status all participants in this study shared the common experience of parenting middle school aged children. The participants
in this study had a total of 29 school-aged children (see Appendix E for a table detailing Age and Gender of Participant’s Children). All parents interviewed currently had at least one middle-school aged child (grades 5-8) for a total of seven middle school girls and nine middle school boys. Several parents were also experiencing the trials and tribulations of parenting middle school aged children for a second and even third time. Seven of the eleven participants were also parenting high school aged children (grades 9-12) for a total of nine students (five girls and four boys). Additionally, four of the study participants were also parenting elementary aged students in addition to their middle school students. The four participants with younger children had a total of four elementary aged children (three girls and one boy). The many years of parenting experience, specifically parenting experience of early adolescents, as well as the fairly equal experience of parenting male (14) and female (15) adolescents strengthens the overall findings of the research.

Parent Profiles

Despite their many similarities, each of the parent participants in this study brought unique perspectives to the discussion based on their personal background and experiences. Ecological studies examine how groups within a system interact with one another and how individuals within a group can influence the decision making and actions for a particular group in a system. Having utilized Bronfenbrenner’s *ecological systems theory* (1979/1994) as the theoretical framework for this research study, a brief examination of the background of the individual participants enhances understanding regarding participant roles in their group and within the system.
Diane Brown was the mother of two middle school aged children, including a son in eighth grade and a daughter in sixth grade. The Brown family joined the charter school when their oldest son was in Kindergarten and cited being attracted to the school’s mission of *parents as primary educators*. Mrs. Brown noted that the time spent supporting her children had lessened as they matured, but found there was more worry than work with middle school children. Mrs. Brown made it a point to attend all major school events like curriculum night and parent conferences and tried to attend other school-sponsored programming on occasion. She had volunteered at the school when her children were in elementary school, but as they entered middle school she cut back on her time at the school. She and her husband spent more of their time coaching their children in extracurricular sports. Mrs. Brown was very vocal about the importance of fostering independence in her early adolescent children.

Robin Bryant was the mother of three children; an eighth grade boy, a seventh grade girl, and a third grade girl. The Bryant family joined the charter school when their oldest child was in Kindergarten. Mrs. Bryant was a stay-at-home mom who had earned a Master’s degree. She had volunteered at the school and in school parent organizations over the years, but stressed the importance of allowing her middle school children space and had recently cut back on her involvement in the school.

Tom Fulks was the sole male participant in this study. Mr. Fulks was the father of two children, a daughter who was a junior in high school and a son who was in seventh grade at the charter school. The Fulks family joined the charter school when the oldest child was in Kindergarten and cited being attracted to the school’s mission of *parents as primary educators* and *classical education*. Mr. Fulks was so enamored with the school that he eventually joined the Board of Trustees and served as the President of the Board for several years. Mr. Fulks
explained that his time and involvement in the school had waned since his term as president had concluded. He cautioned that parents should pace themselves when involving themselves in governance to avoid possible burn out, yet was very vocal that it was the duty of all parents to participate and support the school as much as possible.

Molly Hogan had three children; a son who was a junior in high school, a daughter in eighth grade, and a second son in fifth grade. The Hogan family joined the charter school when their daughter was in fifth grade, transferring from a small Montessori school, their oldest son did not attend the charter school. Mrs. Hogan was a former assistant district attorney who became a stay-at-home mother. She frequently attended school-sponsored programming citing the invaluable information she learned and was able to utilize with her children. Mrs. Hogan was very complimentary of the school, yet, made note of the limited opportunities to interact with staff and get to “know” her children’s teachers.

Marguerite Holland’s children joined the charter school during their middle school years. Mrs. Holland had three children, two daughters in high school and a son in eighth grade. Mrs. Holland worked as a counselor to early adolescents and adolescents on a part time basis. Her family joined the charter school during the middle school years because of its small community feel. Mrs. Holland felt that the charter school fostered a more protective environment than the district middle school and wished to avoid exposing her children to many of the problems associated with adolescence for as long as possible. She acknowledged that the middle schoolers at the charter school did experience many typical adolescent problems, but seemingly on a much smaller scale to what she had encountered through her work with children of the same age.
Jordan Jackson was a stay-at-home mother to three children. Mrs. Jackson left her career, having earned a Master’s degree, to raise her children. Claiming to be an “older” parent, Mrs. Jackson expressed concerns regarding academic expectations for her middle school aged children and particularly information regarding social media. Mrs. Jackson’s oldest son who was a junior in high school joined the charter school in the seventh grade, her daughter was a seventh grader at the time of the study, and she had another son in second grade.

Elizabeth Kostas had been part of the charter school community for thirteen years at the time of the study. She was the mother to three children; a daughter in twelfth grade, a son in ninth grade, and a daughter in seventh grade. All three children attended the charter school from the time when they entered Kindergarten. Mrs. Kostas was drawn to the school’s pillar of character education and spoke very highly of the school’s former dedication to teaching character. She expressed concern regarding the lack of depth in communications the school provided comparing them to much more detailed communications in the early years of the school. Mrs. Kostas worked part-time from home and also taught an enrichment class at the school once a week, providing her access to middle school students as an instructor as well as a parent.

Anne Leathers was the parent to three girls in ninth grade, seventh grade, and the first grade. The family joined the charter school when the oldest daughter was in the fifth grade. Mrs. Leathers was a stay-at-home mom, who made a conscious effort to volunteer at the school and learn more about the environment her children experienced daily. Mrs. Leathers made a point to attend major programming events like curriculum night and parent-teacher conferences, but explained that parenting three children often got in the way of attending other school events.
She did comment that whenever she did make the time to attend school programming it was very much worth her time and she chastised herself for not attending more events.

Kate Martino’s eighth grade son joined the charter school in seventh grade. Mrs. Martino had a second middle-school aged child, a daughter in seventh grade, who chose to remain in their town’s school system. Mrs. Martino worked full-time as a guidance counselor at a middle school in a neighboring town and was very familiar with parental involvement and issues surrounding early adolescence. Mrs. Martino estimated that 75-80% of her work day was spent working with parents of early adolescents, instead of the adolescents themselves. As an educator, Mrs. Martino saw the value in attending school-sponsored programming, but found that family schedules made it difficult to attend on a regular basis. She expressed the importance of being vocal in the education of one’s child and related to some of the experiences she had encountered as the parent of an early adolescent with learning disabilities.

Maria Miralles was the parent to two boys; a son in tenth grade and a second son in sixth grade. Her oldest son joined the charter school when he was in Kindergarten. Mrs. Miralles’s first language was not English. Throughout the interview sessions she referenced the differences between her own childhood in a very discipline centered home, to the parenting choices she and her husband were making with their boys and their focus on providing sufficient emotional support. Mrs. Miralles felt that her strong beliefs and rules for her boys set her apart from many of her peers, yet expressed great relief after the intervention in finding she was not alone in her parenting decisions.

The final participant in this study was Mary O’Connell, a parent to a seventh grade boy, a sixth grade boy, and a third grade girl. Mrs. O’Connell had obtained a Master’s degree, but was
a stay-at-home mother working periodically as a substitute in the charter school. Mrs. O’Connell had taken an active role in school parent organizations over the years and expressed concerns over the school’s communication efforts. Mrs. O’Connell was also critical of the changes between the elementary grades and middle school grades in the school citing breakdowns in communication and over-reliance on early adolescents to share information with families. Mrs. O’Connell frequently attended school-sponsored programs at the charter school and was known to take part in programming offered by the district schools and other community resources.

Findings

This research study was composed of three phases: two interview sessions and attendance at a school-sponsored workshop on social media and cyber-bullying. The first one-on-one interview sessions took place in early to mid-October. During the first interview session participants were asked to define what parental involvement meant to them and discussed a number of topics including their practices, the challenges of parenting adolescents, changes to their parenting style as children matured, and their views on communication between the school and home in regards to supporting the development of early adolescent children (See Appendix F for Session I Interview Questions). Attendance at the school-sponsored program, referred to as a Pillar Night because of its intent to support and represent the school’s core value or pillar of parents as primary educators, took place on Tuesday, October 29, 2013. The final phase of the study consisted of a second one-on-one interview with the student investigator that focused primarily on the participant’s impressions of the program and a discussion of the positive and negative attributes of school-sponsored programming for early adolescent families (See Appendix G for Session II Interview Questions).
Understanding the Factors that Influence Parental Involvement

Parents and schools agree that parental involvement is a key factor in the success of students, yet parents and schools often have different definitions for the term. Researchers, parents, and schools have noted a wide range of activities associated with parental involvement. For this study, parents were introduced to Joyce Epstein’s (1995) classification system of six modes of parenting activities including: parenting, communicating, volunteering, support for learning at home, participation in decision making, and collaboration with the community.

When asked to rank order the modes of involvement in relevance to their own practices as the parent to an early adolescent, parenting was unanimously chosen as the most important means to connect with children (See Appendix H for detailed rankings by participants). Learning at home and communicating closely followed and the least important factor for the parents interviewed was participation in decision making. Parents cited their trust in the current administration to make the appropriate educational decisions for their children and the school, and they chose to invest their time and resources in more direct contact with their own children. How interviewees viewed and practiced parenting, communicating, learning at home, and their parental involvement practices were discussed heavily in the first session.

What does Parental Involvement mean to parents of early adolescents?

The middle school parents interviewed for this study agreed that effective parental involvement requires learning to balance encouraging children’s autonomy while still providing hands-on-support when necessary. Parents struggled with trying to stay informed and a part of their child’s daily lives while at the same time attempting to eliminate some of the parental supports provided in the elementary years to foster more independence in their early adolescents:
I have an awareness of what is going on daily, or even weekly, with my children. I don’t need to know every single aspect of their lives, but I do know what’s going on with them and how they are feeling - if they are feeling good, if they are feeling bad, if they are just humming along. I am also aware of all the things that they need to do and things they want to do. (Hogan, Session I)

Molly Hogan’s definition of parental involvement speaks to the importance of awareness and knowledge in parenting early adolescents while also acknowledging the growing need for independence of middle school students. Elements of Molly’s definition of parental involvement were echoed throughout the conversations of her peers.

Knowledge of a middle school child’s life was paramount in each parent’s definition of parental involvement. Parents interviewed differed on the degree to which they were directly involved in their adolescents’ lives. Robin Bryant was the parent to three school aged children, including an eight year old girl and two middle schoolers; she spoke to the difference in the degree of hands-on involvement between her elementary aged child and her middle school children:

It’s much different at the eight year old level…It’s much more hands on involvement. As for Jeremy and Zoe, there is a lot more space. I’m trying to stand back, oversee, make contact here and there – acting as a checkpoint, without micromanaging them. (Session I)

Kate Martino, parent to two middle school aged children, supported Robin’s sentiments:

Who I am as a parent in my relationship with the kids from when they were little to now, as they have grown through the different milestones, is very different. My role as Mom
has been to help them to grow and now is to help them become more independent.

(Session I).

Parents who spoke on the differences between parenting elementary aged children and middle school aged children all agreed elementary students required more direct attention and middle school children needed more independence.

Fostering independence while staying “involved” was a source of difficulty for many parents and two different approaches became evident throughout the conversations held with the interviewees. The majority of interviewees discussed their role as one of providing guidance and direction, “We help out with homework, we provide some guidance and direction, and we just keep up with what they are doing,” (Brown, Session I). Diane Brown went on to describe how she and her husband had made a conscious effort to allow their children more space as they entered their adolescent years, to avoid becoming “over-involved and helicopter parents”. Brown explained, “My husband and I really make an effort to give them a little bit of their own space to learn and to grow and to fail on their own,” (Session I). Other parents supported the idea of fostering independence, but were more leery of providing their adolescent children more freedom. When asked what parental involvement of middle school aged students meant to her, Maria Miralles responded:

It means being up to date about everything that is going on. It means knowing what they are doing in school, what friends they have, how they feel, how their day went, how much sleep they had, who they play with, what kind of activities they participated in, what they like… (Session I)
Being available and as informed as possible was very important to many of the parents interviewed. Elizabeth Kostas, parent to two high school aged children and a middle school student even changed her work schedule to better accommodate the needs of her children, “I have established myself so that I am able to work at home, so I can really be a part of their lives and be available, and change my schedule as needed,” (Session I).

All parents interviewed stressed the importance of being accessible to their children. Anne Leathers said, “I am it for them. I need to be there, their touchstone. If they have questions I need to be able to be a safe place for them,” (Session I). Marguerite Holland suggested that effective parental involvement sometimes required going beyond just being present:

I would say that it entails some tones of actually stepping into their worlds and not just observing, but maybe guiding in some way. Possibly crossing over that boundary into having a little more knowledge of what is happening in their life and a little bit more control. (Session I)

Tom Fulks, parent to a high school and a middle school aged child, agreed that being part of both the child’s academic and social world was incredibly important. He believed that effective parental involvement meant, “…being as involved in the school activities and with the child as possible,” (Fulks, Session I). Mr. Fulks made special note of the importance of attending school activities to be able to witness the students in action with their peers. Whether stepping back from the degree of involvement in the elementary years, or even increasing availability to their middle school children, all parents concurred that effective parental involvement included knowledge of their children’s daily lives, availability to their children, and providing guidance.
Parent Perceptions of the Needs of the Early Adolescent Child

Early adolescence is a time of great change and as their children begin to experience the transformation of their physical bodies, their cognitive abilities, and feelings, the parents also undergo changes of their own. What is often categorized as a confusing period of development for children can be equally mystifying for parents of early adolescents. In order to effectively involve themselves in their children’s lives, parents of early adolescents need to understand the needs and challenges facing today’s early adolescents. All of the parents interviewed acknowledged the speed and overwhelming number of changes early adolescents face and expressed great sympathy for their children’s plight:

In the middle school they are so uneasy and there are so many changes. It’s so tumultuous that I really feel like they’re still trying to figure it out and they don’t know how to. And now, all of a sudden there are boys and girls, and they are looking at each other differently, and the work is harder – so they are constantly figuring out so much! (Leathers, Session I).

Just as their children are learning to navigate the myriad of changes associated with early adolescence, the parents of these children were also learning how to parent in such a way that the changing needs were met.

The Need for Independence. The parents interviewed for this study overwhelmingly agreed that fostering independence in their children was one of the most important roles they had as a parent of an early adolescent. Jordan Jackson, mother of a junior in high school, a seventh grader and an elementary aged student said, “My ultimate goal is for them to be independent,”
(Session I). As children learn how to be more self-sufficient, parents of early adolescents learn how to foster independence while still maintaining involvement levels.

Easing the transition from childhood to early-adolescence is a difficult process and as Molly Hogan discussed, was reminiscent of another developmental transition period:

When you have middle schoolers in your home it is sort of like having toddlers. I noticed that it is very unpredictable; you think it’s going to be smooth because they are older and more independent, and they are to a certain extent, but there are also lots of bumps and curves that tend to throw you. There are lots of things that are unexpected, even if you have done it before! It is kind of bumpy, almost like when they are first starting to walk and go out on their own – I feel the primary years and middle school years are very similar in a lot of ways. (Session I)

Just as the toddler learns to pull herself up and lean on furniture when taking her first steps, the early adolescent learns to navigate a more complex world by leaning on their parent for support.

Letting go of parent controls can be difficult for parents of early-adolescents. As Molly Hogan commented, “Sometimes it is hard to stand back,” (Session I). When asked if her parenting style had changed as her children entered early adolescence Robin Bryant responded, “Yes, I do. I think I forced myself to change because I don’t want them to feel stifled or micromanaged. I’m not a fan of it [micromanagement] and I’m trusting they aren’t either,” (Session I). Kate Martino, who worked as a middle school guidance counselor explained that being a parent to two middle school aged children meant she had to, “…walk a very fine line between watching a lot and observing, and then stepping in when I need to,” (Session I). Early adolescents may begin to take on more individual responsibility and become more independent,
but they do not do so unaided. Parents need to be on-the-ready and as Kate Martino explained, ready to step in when needed.

**The Importance of the Peer Group.** Early adolescents often appear to be pre-occupied with their peer group. Whether hanging out, talking on the phone, texting, or any other of the many forms of communication available to today’s early adolescents, today’s children are in frequent communication with their peers. Crockett, Losoff, and Petersen (1984) found that the majority of an early-adolescent’s free time is spent interacting with their friends. While Crockett, Losoff, and Petersen’s work observed that an early adolescent’s friendships did not replace the importance of their relationship with their parents, many of the parents interviewed discussed their feelings regarding the newfound importance of friends in their child’s life.

Kate Martino had mixed reactions to her children’s need to be more independent and spend more time with their peer group. Given her experience working with middle school students she was still surprised by the suddenness of the change in her children’s behaviors:

> I think it hit me as a massive surprise and I do not know why because this is what I deal with working in this field. It was like all of a sudden they went from being my two kids with the cute little faces to something completely different. And I can’t put an exact date on it, but it seemed like someone flipped a switch and they started to pull away from me. For me, it made me proud – I can look back over the first ten years [of their lives] now and say, ‘Okay, I did a good job.’ …I think there is a little bit of a mourning process over those first ten years being over and that was kind of a shock for me,. I didn’t see it coming – the pull away, the independence. (Martino, Session I)
Acknowledging the new importance of friends in their children’s lives was difficult for many parents, but was often made easier when they had knowledge of their child’s peer group. When discussing the change in her oldest son, Diane Brown commented, “He used to be very attached to us, but we definitely see the friends becoming more of a priority in his life. But I think that has been okay for us to deal with because he has good friends,” (Session I). Parents who approved of their child’s peer group seemed to have less concerns about their child’s involvement with peers than parents who did not know their child’s peer group.

*How Parents Respond to Increased Attention to the Peer Group.* Parents interviewed in this study combatted their child’s change in allegiance by ingratiating themselves with their child’s peer group. Anne Leathers discussed how volunteering at the school enabled her to have a better understanding of her children’s peer group:

I find that being a room parent or doing recess duty enables you to be in the classroom and put faces to some of these names you’ve been hearing and see some of their interactions and I’ve found that has helped me to understand them better - just being in their environment. (Session I)

Anne Leathers was not alone; in fact many of the parents interviewed discussed their strategy of getting to know the peer group as a way of being involved in their child’s life.

Mary O’Connell felt that it was almost impossible to know everything that was impacting her early adolescent children’s lives, so she focused on becoming familiar with their friends and their environment to develop a better understanding of their needs and how she would best be able to support her children:
It’s not knowing everything. I would say that in the middle school it is almost better to know their environment – who they eat lunch with, who they sat with on the bus, who was absent and who was in school that day. Really what their interactions were and how their day was as a whole, versus specific academic information. (Session I)

Marguerite Holland agreed with Mary O’Connell’s strategy saying:

I definitely try to make opportunities to be around their friends. I might help in planning some activities to be able to see their friends. I like to be able to meet the parents of the kids and just be able to observe. A lot of time it’s just an observation from a distance to see the quality of the interactions between the kids. Really just to get a read to see how comfortable they are feeling, or if they are struggling. I am trying to determine if they are putting on an act and whether they’re comfortable or not. (Session I)

While the majority of parents reported positive interactions with their children and their children’s peer group, Robin Bryant discussed the difficulty in addressing concerns she might have about certain children the child’s peer group. Admitting to being an “opinionated” parent, she found herself having to monitor her responses to her children about their friends,

“…sometimes I have to stop myself from the comment [I want to make] about the friend and the behavior…sometimes I still do [make the comment], and then I find I have put him in a position to defend and I think, ‘Gosh, darn it!’,” (Bryant, Session I). Robin Bryant went on to explain that when her son felt she was being over critical he would shut down communication. Awareness of early adolescent’s allegiance to their peers influences the ways in which parents of middle schoolers interact with their children and can cause friction between parents and their children.
**The Importance of Open Conversations and Role Playing.** Infants and children require direct instruction to help navigate their world and better understand their place and the expectations for their behavior. As early adolescents transition to being able to “do” for themselves, parents found their role as a parent changing. The concept of guidance or acting as a guide was prevalent in the discussions of the parents interviewed for this study. All of the parents interviewed agreed with Molly Hogan’s thoughts on the role of a middle school parent, “I think that by the time the child has entered middle school or early adolescence, the parent is becoming more of a guide and not so much of the director,” (Session II).

According to the parents interviewed, parenting early adolescents became less physically demanding, but required more thought and conversation. Diane Brown commented that parenting middle schoolers required, “less work and more worry” (Session I). Although parents spoke about their children pulling away during early adolescence, they all found time to talk with their children. The importance of finding time to speak one-on-one was apparent through the frequency of which it was discussed in the interviews. Marguerite Holland explained the role of conversation as a parent to early adolescents:

I would say that we have more conversations as the kids have gotten older. Possibly because I’m not observing as much as I was before, and I don’t have as much time to be present with them as I was when they were younger ages. When they were younger I also knew the families of their friends, and now, especially as they enter high school, there are some friends whom I have never met or know their families at all. There’s a lot more conversation about the people they are spending their time with. I try to encourage, instead of just grilling them all the time, for them to come and speak with me and tell me what is going on in their lives. (Session I)
Parents made the most of any opportunity to speak with their children and catch up on what was going on in their children’s lives. Whether during dinner, before bedtime, or in the car the parents interviewed used conversation as a tactic to find out information, reinforce family values, and provide moral support.

In an effort to learn more about her children’s day, Mary O’Connell and her husband used dinner time as a venue to open discussions with their children, “A lot of times at dinner we will ask the kids to tell us three things they learned or three things they did in school that day,” (Session I). O’Connell went on to explain that by starting small, her children would often open up and share much more of what was taking place socially and academically. Elizabeth Kostas used discussions with her children to reinforce family values and past lessons, “I think you need to talk to them more in middle school and remind them of who they are and what we [the family] are about,” (Session I). Anne Leathers talked about her child’s need for reassurance and how being available and listening to her child helped ease anxiety, “…sometimes she needs to touch base…She’ll say, ‘I have this, this, and this,’ and there is me, kind of validating her feelings saying, ‘Oh, I know you have a lot of work to do. That must be really difficult,’” (Session I).

*The Need for Specific Questions and Background Information.* While conversation was the most commonly utilized format to interact with children, several parents noted frustration initiating conversations with their early adolescents. Some children take on the role of a gatekeeper, sharing only the information they find important with their parents, “Asking my children questions and their responses only being what they want me to know can be frustrating,” (O’Connell, Session I). Several parents commented that if the school were able to better communicate issues that were taking place, they as parents would be better able to ask appropriate questions and better support their children:
Sometimes I think it is hard for the kids to tell you when something is wrong and so I think it is important that the school be providing information to give you an idea about what you can ask your students. I find that if you don’t ask the students pointed questions they won’t give you enough information. That is my biggest struggle. (Hogan, Session I)

Anne Leathers acknowledged the difficulty of getting information from early adolescents, but also recognized the child’s reluctance to relive the details of their day:

…If they think they’re going to have to explain a lot of stuff they’re not going to go into detail. They are exhausted – they have already lived it once, they are not going to retell it. But, if you are there and you know the players or the situation, they can just tell you the incident and not exhaust themselves with the whole story. (Session I)

Robin Bryant also spoke to the value of background information and how it affected her ability to effectively parent early adolescents:

Any time that I can have information without pestering, that I can use to open or start a conversation where I actually know something, and am not opening with a question, that is a help as a parent. At least for the way that I am approaching parenting. (Session II)

Having the knowledge to guide conversations and know what questions to ask their children was of great importance to the parents interviewed. As a result of their conversations the parents were able to employ strategies such as role-playing to help their children navigate difficult situations they had encountered.
The Importance of Role Playing. Guiding children through life’s many challenges is a key component of parenting an early adolescent. In their discussions of how they directed these young men and women, many parents talked about the use of role playing; an off-shoot of one-on-one conversations. Jordan Jackson spoke of her twelve year old daughter’s need to speak of upsetting social interactions and her daughter’s reluctance to do so in front of her siblings:

We find time and we talk. Usually it’s about her being in the middle of something – this girl doesn’t like this girl and someone saying they don’t want to be the other girl’s friend, but they still want to be Ginny’s friend… We talk about how she can’t be in the middle and that she had to keep saying, “Don’t put me in the middle. If you want to say something you need to say it to her.” (Jackson, Session I)

Role-playing often involves reinforcing family values and past lessons. Practicing difficult conversations with a safe person, a parent, emboldens children to go forth and have the same conversations with their peers.

Role playing with children requires parents to acknowledge both the strengths and weaknesses of their children while providing direction on how to handle difficult situations:

I know with my daughter, she often needs support or reminders that she should set boundaries for others and that it is okay to set boundaries in relationships; to not be taken advantage of – and that’s hard. It’s hard for adults and it’s hard for teenagers who are trying this for the first time. I think she is like a lot of girls and she doesn’t want to disappoint people; she will take on a lot of stuff for other people because she wants to be a caretaker. She needs reminders sometimes to take care of herself first. I think role-playing has helped her to know what to say and even to practice how to say it. It takes
place in the car, usually as we’re running errands, so it doesn’t always feel like a lecture. We’re just chatting; so that has been very helpful with her.” (Jordan, Session II)

Role playing with children provides a stress-free environment in which early adolescents can practice difficult tasks. It can build confidence and communication skills while also providing children the opportunity to view a situation from different perspectives. Parents who employed this technique agreed it was an effective way to guide their children through early adolescence.

**The Early Adolescent Need to Test Boundaries.** Many a harebrained scheme has begun by paying homage to the familiar adage, “Rules are meant to be broken.” Early adolescents are hardly immune to the thrill of breaking rules and often begin to test the boundaries of behavior and expectations within their families and peer group during this stage of development. Parents interviewed for this study recounted stories of extreme stubbornness, moodiness, flashes of anger, and the ever-popular eye roll.

Tom Fulks commiserated with other parents who were frustrated by what seemed to be a Jekyll and Hyde syndrome, where children behaved one way at home and another in public:

He’s also at the age in middle school where he is somewhat defiant. We see this all the time and hear this from other parents as well. He can be so sweet, so when we say something to a teacher about his defiance they often ask if we are talking about the same child. He can be so sweet in school with people other than immediate family, whether it’s a relative or stranger or whatever, but he is more defiant to his mother and father. I don’t know if it’s pure pressure or what it is, but he seems to think that it is cool to insult his sister. (Fulks, Session I)
The rapid change in behavior can make parents question their sanity. Robin Bryant shared that she experienced similar changes with her daughter,

This whole eye-roll gesture moving thing…We have just been clashing. She is just changing. One day she’s acting like a teenager and the next she’s acting like the eight year old. I think, "I just don’t know how I’m going to get through this with the girls." 

(Bryant, Session I).

In an attempt to be more independent, Jordan Jackson’s daughter tried a new laundry procedure, separate from that of her family that no longer relied on her mother’s help. Thrilled that her daughter wanted to take on a new responsibility, Jordan Jackson quickly learned that her daughter was having great difficulty. Despite her daughter’s troubles with the new system, the twelve year old girl was stubbornly insisting to continue her “new” way of doing the laundry. Jordan lamented, “She hasn’t given in yet. She hasn’t said, ‘Well, this isn’t a great idea…’, but there’s hope she will,” (Jackson, Session I). While their children’s often erratic behavior caused frustration, many parents were hopeful that it was merely a stage that needed to be weathered.

Parents also referred to the importance of creating a strong sense of morality in their children. Mary O’Connell explained, “We try to enforce with them that every family has different rules and different criteria,” to make clear why their family had rules that her children’s peers did not. Many of the parents also recognized that despite their best efforts, their children would test the boundaries and break rules during early adolescence. Many of the interviewees agreed with Maria Miralles’ comments about addressing bad behavior when it surfaced:

In the end they will make their own decisions, they will make wrong decisions, and that’s okay, but they will also know that they were wrong. If you just look the other way
whenever there is a problem your children will never learn where you stand and in turn, will never learn how to behave and stand up for what they believe in. (Session II).

Parents interviewed for this study sincerely hoped that their children would ultimately make good decisions about behavior. They recognized that they could no longer make the decisions for their children and had to trust in the values they had provided calling to mind the insightful words of Anne Frank, “Parents can only give good advice or put them on the right paths, but the final forming of a person’s character lies in their own hands.”

The Need for Academic Support. In addition to the social and emotional needs of early adolescent children, the parents in this study also recognized children’s need for academic support. Similar in nature to an early adolescents’ need for autonomy in their peer group, the parents interviewed recognized their children’s need for more independence in their school work. When discussing changes in their parenting practices, the amount of time put forth in supporting early adolescents with academic work dropped drastically from the elementary years. Diane Brown commented that the time she spent helping her two children with homework went from several hours a week when they were in elementary school to less than one hour a week in the middle school years.

The biggest area where students still required academic support was with organization. In the elementary years, many parents recounted hours sitting beside their children and assisting them with every assignment. As their children progressed to middle school parents encouraged independence and help with homework often took the shape of reminders:

He has begun to start doing it himself [homework], which is what you want, but sometimes he still needs a reminder. You have to nag him about it - but if you have to,
you have to. You want them to do it and you want them to understand time management. (Fulks, Session II).

Maria Miralles added, “They want to be accountable, sometimes it just doesn’t work because they’re not used to the discipline. They tend to forget little parts,” (Session I).

Molly Hogan explained how academic support transitioned from content support to organizational support as her children grew older:

The way we do it at my home is not so much focusing on the specific aspects of the subject, but instead paying attention to the nuts and bolts of how to get things done. Because sometimes things don’t seem to go from Point A to Point B, so I find that we focus a lot on logistics. I check in and make sure that they are using the systems they are provided accurately. Asking them where their binders are, are they using them correctly, are they filling in their planners…but not so much attention to the topic. (Session I)

Parents explained that when it came to daily homework assignments the children were “pretty much on their own” (Brown, Session I) when they got to middle school. While parents often checked to make sure the homework was completed, actual help with completing assignments was designated for large projects or in subjects that were difficult for their children:

I will look at work that comes home, but not everything and not every day. As I said, I don’t look over his shoulder while he is working, but I do like to check in with particular subject areas. If he’s working on a big writing project I might do some editing for him. I might ask him some follow-up questions, and since I speak French, I sometimes help him with this French homework. (Holland, Session I)
Parents also discussed helping their children prepare for quizzes and tests by quizzing them from study guides provided in school. Direct instruction or detailed support in specific subject areas was rare with the parents interviewed.

The Need for Clearly Defined Academic Expectations. Parents interviewed in this study expressed some frustration with lack of knowledge regarding the expectations of teachers in regards to their children’s academic progress. Just as their children required guidance from their parents, the parents were looking for guidance from the school, “I don’t know how involved I should be with their academics and how much I should be a tutor…I don’t know what the teacher’s thoughts on that are,” (Bryant, Session I).

Jordan Jackson elaborated on the concerns of what was appropriate work for her daughter:

Although I would say that helping with homework is beneficial, I don’t have a good handle on what my child should be able to do at this point. I look at her paper and I think that this might not be the best work, but then I wonder if I’m being too hard. Perhaps at this age level this is perfect. So that is something that I would be interested in knowing. I would like to know what the expectations are, especially with the writing. It seems like in math there is just an answer, but with English there are some issues with grammar and description and at what level their work should be – how organized should their paragraphs be by a certain age. (Session II)

The concerns of Jordan Jackson and Robin Bryant were not isolated. In order to best support their children at home parents were in need of information and guidance from the school. By working in tandem, school and home, children reap the benefits and when the school and home
are separate or even working against one another, the children pay the price. The following section will discuss the ways parents of middle school students interacted with the middle school and parents’ perceptions regarding the value of each form of communication and interaction.

**How Parent Interactions with the Middle School Influences Parental Involvement**

Throughout the interviews conducted for this research study it became very clear that parents viewed the school and the home as separate and distinct entities. Despite the many positive comments from the parents regarding the school and the school’s role in supporting students and families, the two groups seemed to fall short of becoming a unified team. The parents recognized the school’s efforts to share information and support parents at home, but then became frustrated by the lack of consistency in the way information was communicated. The school seemed to be aware of the needs of middle school parents, but unable to effectively and efficiently meet those needs. In many respects, it appeared that all of the ingredients for successful home-to-school partnership were in existence; they just weren’t being utilized in an efficient manner leading to frustration and an overall lack of consistent involvement.

**Too Much of a Good Thing?** In their discussion of parental needs, the participants interviewed for this study overwhelmingly agreed that information provided by the school regarding their child’s social and academic well-being increased their ability to make informed parenting decisions and ultimately benefited the child. The charter school employed many strategies to disseminate information including individual teacher websites, a school-wide website, parent groups, committees, conferences, notices, and newsletters; yet the topic of communication remained a concern for all of interviewees leading parents to question the overall effectiveness of the communication strategies employed by the school.
Websites. A benefit of modern life is access to the internet and instant information on any number of topics. Schools quickly realized that important information could be shared with students, staff, parents, and the community at large through school websites. The charter school was no exception and over the last two years, with the hiring of a new Director of Technology, revamped their school website to be more helpful to the entire learning community. As Mary O’Connell said, “…the website has made incredible progress. It’s a complete 180 degrees from where it used to be…I think he does a really excellent job of getting new information up in a timely manner,” (Session I). Parents were able to learn about current events, access forms, view policies, communicate with staff, and explore individual teacher websites that are frequently updated with homework and other classroom news.

Aside from requiring contact information and updating homework assignments, teachers at the charter school were given autonomy to design their individual websites as they see fit. The lack of continuity in teacher website design was a source of frustration for many of the middle school parents interviewed. Considering middle school students had four core academic teachers, two language instructors, and a number of specialist teachers it was no wonder parents had experienced difficulty in trying to obtain information:

I am really struggling with the websites right now. In order to stay connected with what is going on, I have to check at least six individual teacher websites and every teacher’s website is different. If something is easy you will do it over and over again, making it a habit; but if it is cumbersome and confusing, then you don’t really use it. I feel like that is what is happening with the websites. (Hogan, Session I)
Robin Bryant agreed that the teacher websites were difficult to navigate and not useful to her as a parent of middle school aged children, “I don’t look online that much. I used to before, but now that there are 14 teachers I find that I just don’t have the time,” (Session I).

Parent Groups and Committees. The charter school hosted several parent groups or organizations including the Parent Community Organization (PCO), the Parent Advisory Council (PAC), and the Parent Enrichment Council (PEC). Mary O’Connell lamented, “People at the school don’t even know the difference between the different organizations. We have PEC, PCO, PAC, etc. It all needs to be streamlined,” (Session I). The number of groups with similar missions led to confusion on the part of parents. Each group had sponsored parent programming, yet many parents felt that a program sponsored by some of the organizations within the school would not apply to their needs as a parent. The Parent Advisory Council was formed to support parents of children with alternative learning styles, and had brought in a host of speakers who addressed the attributes of all children. Mary O’Connell discussed the low attendance at PAC sponsored events:

I know that PAC has brought in tremendous speakers in the past, and I know that attendance is low at events anyway, but I wonder if attendance is even lower at PAC events because parents associate PAC with special needs and think it does not apply to their children. (Session II)

Confusion regarding the many different parent organizations in the school was a barrier to parental involvement for the parents interviewed. Uncertainty regarding value for parents and misconceptions about the specific groups discouraged parents from becoming involved.
The Pink Sheet or Whole School Newsletter. Originating in the earliest days of the charter school’s operation, the Pink Sheet, so-named because of the hot pink colored paper on which it was printed, had served as the school’s weekly communication to the parent community. Intended to provide parents pertinent information regarding the school the parents in this study questioned its effectiveness. Many of the parents interviewed discussed issues with ease of access and the accuracy and depth of the newsletter’s content.

Many parents found fault with the delivery of the Pink Sheet to families. No longer printed on the hot pink paper and distributed to students, the Pink Sheet moved to an electronic format delivered via a mass email from the school once a week. Understanding the financial benefits of electronic delivery, Tom Fulks still wondered, “…if there were some other ways to change the digital Pink Sheets and bring back the hard copy,” (Session I). Mary O’Connell was much more vocal about her concerns with the Pink Sheet citing:

I used to treat it as a bible and I would save it with all of their weekly papers until I realized I was becoming a semi-hoarder! There has got to be a better presentation of the material online – I even find the color distracting and hard to read. You can still call it the Pink Sheet, but make it a different color background on the screen. It is also very frustrating when you go to click on a link and the link has disappeared. There was a situation with Chess Club and for several weeks the link was not working and I ended up having to dig back months prior to find the appropriate link – most parents are not going to do that and just give up on the opportunity. (Session I)

Ease of access was a major sticking point for the parents interviewed. Elizabeth Kostas concurred that despite living in the age of technology, a hard copy of important information
received much more attention as a parent, “The Pink Sheet is a link and even though I am on my computer all the time, I don’t always click on that link and see what is happening in the school,” (Session II).

Parents also expressed concerns with what they referred to as a lack of depth in the communication and redundancy of the information provided. Several parents discussed the lack of new information in each week’s Pink Sheet. Parents said they were reluctant to check the weekly link when the content wasn’t very likely to have changed, yet expressed frustration when they weren’t aware of new information or upcoming events. As Mary O’Connell explained, “…they have been advertising that the Board needs new members for weeks and weeks and weeks. If they haven’t gotten any feedback by now, they are probably not going to,” (Session I).

Elizabeth Kostas who had been a part of the school community for the last thirteen years felt communications between school and home were too fact driven and there was a lack of depth and discussion about what was happening in the schools. Mrs. Kostas reminisced about past practices, “Even the Head of School, she was a very educated and talented woman, would write these beautiful essays about what was going on in the school. Not to blame anyone, but to come from that previous level of communication to today is a disservice to the parents and the kids,” (Session I). According to the interviewees, middle school parents require detailed information that was easy to access to best be able to support their early adolescents’ needs.

**Staying Abreast of Student Progress.** As the parents of middle school students, the interviewees in this study identified a dramatic change in how student progress was reported from when their students were in the elementary grades. Without being able to observe in the classroom, parents relied on corrected work and assessments to gauge student progress between
report cards. “Reviewing quizzes and tests is important for me because it helps me see where the child is, and helps determine if extra help is needed.” (Fulks, Session II). When student work was returned inconsistently, parents were unable to support their child’s academic needs.

“In the elementary years their work would come home on a specific day of the week and we knew to look for it. It wasn’t coming home piecemeal or getting lost in the shuffle,” (O’Connell, Session II). In the middle school teachers returned student work with the expectation that the student would share their work with their families. The parents in this study, particularly the parents of early adolescent boys, reported that corrected work was not being shared on a consistent basis. Mary O’Connell expressed her frustration saying, “I’m relying on my preteen boys to tell me their grades and in the business of our daily lives I’m not seeing the final results,” (Session II). When asked if he felt his son was not sharing his work with his parents as a way of controlling information Tom Fulks responded, “It’s not so much that he’s hiding them, but that he’s not conscientious about getting them to us,” (Session II).

All of the parents of high school aged students discussed the use of online gradebooks and were hopeful the charter school would implement a similar system. In the absence of a returned work folder, the parents found the access to student grades extremely helpful in their role as an academic advisor. Tom Fulks explained how his family used the system with his teenage daughter, “At the high school they have Aspen Portal where parents can pull up student grades at any time. We know right away if Sarah got a C in Chemistry and we can ask her what happened,” (Session II). Ease of access to student progress and removal of the middle-man were considered to be major benefits of online gradebooks. Parents also felt that access to student grades would empower them to have more directed conversations with their children as Mary O’Connell explained, “I could look at their grades when they are at school and be able to talk to
them about it when they got home, or my husband could look up grades during his lunch break,” (Session I). Parents interviewed were very interested in staying abreast of their students’ progress, however, the school’s current system for sharing data left much to be desired.

**Availability of Faculty and Staff.** Just as early adolescents need to be heard and understood by their parents, the parents of early adolescents appreciated the availability and openness of teachers and administration to their needs and concerns. The parents interviewed were overwhelming supportive of the charter school’s teachers and administration citing an “open door atmosphere”. Kate Martino explained, “I have never felt like the door has been closed. I’ve experienced times when people may not have liked what I had to say, but I don’t ever feel as if a door had been closed,” (Session I). Diane Brown stated, “The teachers are always available and willing to talk to you,” (Session I) and Marguerite Holland concurred saying, “The overall tone is that parents are welcome in this school,” (Session I).

Although the parents in this study felt faculty and administration were open and available to their needs, the interviewees voiced concern over the limited opportunities they had to interact with staff and administration. Molly Hogan explained, “I find it hard to get to know my children’s teachers. I don’t think there are enough opportunities to get to know the teachers,” (Session I). Tom Fulks wondered if there could be more informal gatherings for teachers and parents, “I’d like to see a place where parents and teachers can perhaps chat a little more informally…a general conversation letting parents know if their children are telling them they’re doing well they’re doing well or if that is a miscommunication,” (Session I).

The regimented nature of planned meetings and presentations limited the parents and teachers’ abilities to interact with one another. Parents were troubled that much of their short
time together was spent going over facts and lacked the depth a proper discussion would allow for:

Here we have those short [five minute] conferences. “Ding” and then you move on to the next. And they are not even [scheduled] until late November. You don’t really have another chance to touch base [with teachers] unless you seek it out. It is especially hard when you are just starting with the teacher and you don’t know how your child is doing until November. (Bryant, Session I).

Molly Hogan was also concerned that discussions regarding standardized assessments accounted for large portions of the limited time parents and teachers had together:

I find there’s a lot of information about “the test”. There is so much emphasis on the test and I am not really a big test person. I believe it is a skill and you need to learn how to do it, but it is one day in the spring. I would like to know more about what the topics are that you’re going to teach…what your philosophy is… what to expect… Do you like them to do hands-on or more abstract learning? I want to know more about critical thinking and how they collaborate with one another. I feel like those are the skills they are going to need later on in life and those are the things that I want to hear about.

(Session I)

In the many examples provided by the interviewees, school efforts to meet parental needs and parent interactions with the school seemed to be just slightly off-the-mark. Parents wanted information about curriculum, but short conversations were centered on facts and not delivery. Updates about ongoing and upcoming events were shared by the school through a weekly newsletter, but the cumbersome delivery method and redundancy of information left it under-
utilized by many parents. Teacher websites were created as a venue where teachers could provide information regarding their classrooms, philosophy, and the content being covered, but lack of consistency between teacher sites and the sheer number of sites parents needed to navigate was daunting to the interviewees. Recognition of middle school parent needs and the issues regarding communication set the stage for the following research stages. The second and third phases of this research study included participation in a school-sponsored workshop and another one-on-one interview focused on the positive and negative attributes of school-programming and how school-sponsored programming addresses the parenting needs of families with early adolescent children.

**School-Sponsored Programming – A Means to an End?**

In the charter school’s efforts to build community and assist parents in their role as *primary educators*, school administrators created informational evenings called Pillar Nights. JRCS Pillar Nights took place periodically and were often related to the school’s strategic goals for that particular school year. In the past, Pillar Nights were offered by teachers, counselors, and other professionals addressing specific curriculum issues (math facts, writing instruction, new text book series, etc.), community service initiatives, and parenting concerns. The Pillar Night parents in this study attended on Tuesday, October 29, 2013 was presented by social media expert Dr. Elizabeth Englander from the Massachusetts Anger Reduction Committee (MARC). The Pillar Night’s topic, cyber-bullying and social media, was chosen by the administration to support the school’s strategic goal for development of technology and instruction, as well as to support families in their role of *parents as primary educators*. 
Is it the school’s responsibility to educate families?

Parental involvement researchers have found that school-sponsored programming can be advantageous to families citing increased parental confidence and quality of parenting when programs were well designed and responsive to needs of the parent community (Epstein, 2011). As a means to develop the home-school connection and increase parental involvement levels, schools would benefit from the implementation of parent workshops, but the question of whether it was the school’s responsibility to develop parent programming was debated among the parent interviewees for this study.

When questioned if parents thought it was a responsibility of the school to assist parents in supporting their middle school aged children the overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that supporting parents was one of the school’s responsibilities. The two parents who disagreed felt that the school’s first priority was to educate children. Robin Bryant joked, “I ask enough of them for academics. You don’t need to be my therapist too,” (Session I). Marguerite Holland further explained:

I primarily see that their [the school’s] job is to educate the kids. It’s really nice if the school has the resources to reach out to parents and provide services to parents, but I can’t say that I see that overall responsibility being placed on the school. (Session I)

Other interviewees felt much more strongly that collaborating with parents was indeed a responsibility of the middle school. Diane Brown explained that one of the attributes that had attracted her family to the school in the first place was its commitment to parent support, “It is one of the reasons we chose JRCS, because there is the level of communication and guidance they provide,” (Session I). The commitment of this particular school to parents attracted many
of the interviewees. Tom Fulks, who had served in a governance position with the school’s Board of Trustees for several years, discussed the pillar of *parents as primary educators* and the responsibility of parents to collaborate with the school:

> I think it is a two-way street. It is the responsibility of the school to help parents, but it is equally the responsibility of the parents to help the school or to help their students advance. I think that goes back to *parents as primary educators* – one of the reasons we chose to go to this charter school, because we really believe in that concept and that puts the burden back on us. Equally as important, we can’t take on all of that responsibility, so we expect the school to step up very strongly in that area as well. (Session I)

Tom Fulks’ comments alluded to the importance of building a home-school partnership. More than just involvement, a partnership recognizes shared responsibility for ensuring positive outcomes for students. The first round of interviews for this research study defined parental involvement from an early adolescent’s parent perspective and identified needs of both middle school students and their parents. The second interview sessions’ focus was to identify the positive and negative attributes of school-sponsored programming from the perspective of middle school parents to determine if such programming was an effective strategy for fostering parental involvement.

**School-Sponsored Programming Meeting Early Adolescent Parents’ Needs**

Parent participants in this study recognized the value of the charter school’s Cyber-Bullying and Social Media Pillar Night and school-sponsored programming for parents of early adolescents. All interviewees agreed that the program offered by the school addressed a definite need within the parent community and supported their parenting practices. Positive attributes of
school-sponsored programming included: the affirmation of current parent practices; an opportunity to dialogue with peers; expert advice; useful and applicable information; and gained perspective into early adolescent and parent needs. Interviewees made positive connections between the specific program they attended and other school-sponsored presentations. Parents also discussed ways the school could increase attendance for presentations and topics of interest for future presentations. The findings of this study support the need for continued programming in the future.

**Affirmation of Current Parental Practices**

During their discussions on the needs of early adolescents many of the interviewees talked about their children’s demand for affirmation or reassurance. Validating one’s actions is a form of empowerment and just as early adolescents were bolstered by the reassurance of their parents when times were tough, the parents of these adolescents were also strengthened by validation of their parental practices during the Pillar Night presentation. In her first interview session Anne Leathers was gratified to learn that, with the exception of infancy, a child will never undergo as much cognitive, emotional, and social change as they do during early adolescence. Despite having successfully navigated one daughter through middle school and her second daughter nearing the end of seventh grade, Anne appreciated the knowledge and the validation that early adolescence was indeed a difficult time period as evidenced in her remarks:

Quite frankly, I’m not educated in education and hearing things like this, having someone say to me and my child that, “These are tough times, this is just not you getting a bad grade – but this is your body changing, this is your social interactions, this is a boy not knowing how to speak to you and him saying stupid things that are hurtful to you when
he is really trying to be kind…” To somehow express that to them, to reaffirm that to them, that is so important. (Session I)

It was a comfort and a source of support for Anne’s experience as a parent of early adolescents to be substantiated by researchers in the field, as well as being a source of reassurance for her early adolescent with whom she shared that information later the same evening.

A fairly common satirical commentary on modern society quips you need to pass a test to drive a car, but anyone can become a parent. The observation, although usually used in a tongue-in-cheek manner, is sadly accurate. There is no universal parenting manual or instruction book. One does not need to pass an examination or be board-certified to become a parent. When discussing how she and her husband made parenting decisions Maria Miralles said, “All the things we do at home, we basically do them by instinct and common sense,” (Session II). So when early adolescent parents come together at a school sponsored workshop, parents have the opportunity to learn and grow from one another, “It was nice to know that other people have the same ideals, and it was nice to know that other people are experiencing the same problems. There was a lot of reassurance that you are doing a good thing,” (Miralles, Session II).

Many of the parents discussed feelings of isolation when they encountered difficulties with their children. The Pillar Night program revealed that many parents were experiencing the same issues and problems in their own homes. As Tom Fulks explained, it was reassuring to know that they were not alone, “We are always at one point or another listening or talking to other parents and my wife will say, ‘Oh, I thought it was just us.’ I’m glad to hear other parents are going through the same things,” (Session II). Whether first time parents of early adolescents or seasoned mothers and fathers guiding their second or third child through the middle school
years, all the parents interviewed acknowledged the power of having an expert and peers validate their parenting decisions.

**Dialogue with Peers and Professionals**

The Pillar Night presentation allowed participants the opportunity to interact with the expert speaker and with other parents of early adolescents. The dialogue that took place was considered even more valuable than the data provided by the expert according to many of the participants. Marguerite Holland explained the value of live presenters citing, “I think it’s always better to have someone speaking rather than watching a video,” (Session II). Mrs. Holland, who is employed as a certified social worker, appreciated the opportunities live presentations gave audience members to initiate conversations and further their learning on the topic being discussed.

Anne Leathers further detailed what she thought was valuable about presentations that invited parent questions and discussion, “It gives you a forum to voice your concerns, to hear others’ concerns, to make you feel like you’re not living in a vacuum,” (Session II). Molly Hogan supported Anne Leathers’ comments while addressing the value of such presentations in building community in the school, “If you have a program that allows people to get together, get on the same page, and share the same message – it benefits the whole community,” (Session II).

Participants also noted that the small size of the gathering further encouraged group participation. Marguerite Holland explained that, “the ability to ask questions or engage in some type of dialogue, especially if it is a relatively small group is very important,” (Session II). Mary O’Connell added that the, “format of the event, where it was casual and you could ask questions was a strength of the event,” (Session II). Robin Bryant who had attended many Pillar Nights in
the past agreed that participatory presentations, “have been the best ones,” (Session II). The overall impression given by the interviewees was that facts were appreciated, but it was the discussion between parents and with the expert that really make any school-sponsored programming beneficial to parents.

Many of the interviewees expressed an interest in continuing the conversations started in the Pillar Night program. Tom Fulks noted that, “the questions brought out a lot of other issues,” (Session II) and other parents made similar statements. When asked if parent roundtables on particular topics would be of use to the interviewees there was an overwhelming positive response. Several participants mentioned they would like to see school staff and administration be part of such discussions because school faculty would bring a new perspective to the table. Attendance by school staff at parent presentations was seen in a very favorable light and many of the participants made sure to note how much they had appreciated the presence of the school’s Head and Assistant Head of School at the Pillar Night presentation. When school administration and faculty participate in programming, they show their interest in the topic, their concern for the students, and their support for the parents of early adolescents.

**Provision of Applicable Information and Tools**

In addition to having their parenting practices affirmed and being able to engage in conversations with other parents and professionals about topics of importance, the interviewees stressed the importance of being able to apply the knowledge they gained from the programming with their early adolescents. Molly Hogan discussed how knowledge of terminology helped her with her parenting, “Anything that can provide the terminology is useful because it helps me get them to where they are supposed to be,” (Session I).
The Pillar Night on social media and cyber-bullying provided parents with information about how early adolescents were using technology to communicate and according to parents, more importantly provided talking points from which the parents could address their concerns with their children. Elizabeth Kostas discussed the conversation she had with her daughter immediately following the presentation and Dr. Englander’s discussion regarding the perils of posting pictures online, “Coming back and speaking to Delia, because the next night was Halloween, I asked her to please not take pictures, but she said that they were going to take pictures, so I asked her not to post them,” (Session II). Mrs. Kostas was able to cite her newly gained knowledge regarding the dangers of posting photographs on social media with her daughter and felt that the presentation had an immediate impact on her parenting practices.

Molly Hogan explained how participation in school-sponsored programming often highlighted problems or concerns that she had not been able to address or had simply not picked up upon due to busy schedules and other responsibilities:

I gained wisdom about things that occur in your daily life that I had never really paid attention to before because I was caught up in living life. I have gotten great tips, actual and practical things that I could use in my home, from experts that presented on adolescent topics. (Session I)

Participation in programming on specific topics allows parents to focus on that topic for an uninterrupted period of time. All of the parents who attended this program cited their concerns about their early adolescent’s use of technology, but would not have had the time to research the data provided by the presenter and would probably not have engaged in the conversations regarding technology usage with other parents if the forum had not been made available.
Offering New Perspectives

Attending a lecture or a school-sponsored program often provides parents with new information and tools to employ with their early adolescents. Sometimes, a particular presentation might even alter a parent’s approach to parenting, giving them an entirely new perspective from which to operate. Molly Hogan explained how Dr. Engledder’s presentation had opened her eyes to the similarities between children and adults, completely changing her views on social media usage:

The best thing about her talk was that it was almost a complete change of mindset. When I think of the topic now it is different from before I went. I thought it was good of Dr. Englander to point out human tendencies. I think we sometimes accuse children of behaviors we excuse for adults. She pointed out how adults and children are acting in the same way. It didn’t matter if you 16 or 47, the same tendencies were there. (Session II)

Robin Bryant also explained how attendance at this particular program helped her make sense of an issue that was truly foreign to her. Being educated on the importance of social media for early adolescents and the role it plays in the ways they communicate was eye opening for Mrs. Bryant and provided her with information that she could use with her own early adolescents:

I think what it does do is give me more of a sense of what is important to these kids and how they communicate in their world, which is different from my world because I don’t use Facebook. I’m not on these types of sites. I don’t like them. After the program, I was speaking to a friend and was amazed that she knew so much, because I knew so little. I’m just not into it. So, from that perspective, the presentation shed light on how
the kids see things and as a result I could go home and communicate with them about it. Which I did. (Session II)

School-sponsored programming has the potential to educate parents in areas unknown to them. Learning as much about their children’s environment and interactions was incredibly important to the interviewees, so programming that addressed the daily responsibilities and interactions of children is very valuable to parents of early adolescents.

**Parent Suggestions for Future Programming**

School-sponsored programming that addresses parental concerns on relevant topics allows for dialogue with peers and professionals, and provides information and tools that parents can utilize with their early adolescents was seen as an incredible value to the parents interviewed in this study. All of the parents found the Pillar Night on social media and cyber-bullying supported their parenting style and expressed interest in attending more school programming. In their discussions regarding future programming, many suggestions were offered regarding attendance, communication, and the selection of topics.

**Attendance**

Finding time to attend a presentation is difficult given the active lives of families with early adolescents. While discussing their average day, the interviewees spoke at length about time spent transporting children to rehearsals, athletic practices, to their peer’s homes, and other school-related events. All of the parents in this study also had more than one child, creating added demands on parents’ time. The interviewees acknowledged the difficulty in carving out
time to attend a school-sponsored workshop, yet counseled that the benefits associated with attendance far out-weighed the inconvenience to one’s schedule:

The sad thing is that there were not more people to hear the message. I do get it, you only have so much time, and when you’re finally able to get your whole family together the idea of going out to a parent presentation seems difficult. But when else are you going to do it? You have to do it at night and these things are so important. I am just as guilty as the next person of missing them, but whenever I do go, I think, “Why don’t I come to these more often. This is brilliant!” Even if it is one little morsel that you get, you can be there for an entire hour and if you get five minutes that really hit home, it can totally change the way you parent. You are working together and I feel that makes it important. It shows the support of the school and their support of parents is very significant. (Leathers, Session II).

Several parents expressed concerns that the low attendance levels at school-sponsored programming may result in the cancellation of future programming. Mary O’Connell and other parents, hoped the school would continue to offer programming explaining, “I think we should try as often as possible to get people out. If you offer it, they can’t say you didn’t,” (O’Connell, Session II). Elizabeth Kostas explained that while attendance at some events might be lower than expected, parents who attend programming often shared what they learned with parents who did not attend and the message eventually would make its way through the school community, “I know you have to worry about attendance, but no matter what, people talk and your message will be shared,” (Session II). Several parents also recommended sharing presentations with other schools in the district and the community at large. Elizabeth Kostas mentioned that in the past
the school had shared news of upcoming events in the community and she found that to be very helpful as a parent of early-adolescents.

**Communication about School-Sponsored Programming**

Due to their busy and often overscheduled lives, the interviewees found that finding time to attend presentations was difficult, but even more frustrating was that many times didn’t realize the events were taking place because of poor communication and advertising for the event. When asked how parents learned about presentations being offered by the school most parents referred to the school’s newsletter, the Pink Sheet. As previously discussed, many of the interviewees were not utilizing the Pink Sheet on a consistent basis and therefore not learning about events in a timely manner. Many times information about a presentation was to be accessed through clicking on another link in the electronic newsletter. Parents hoped for more detailed information about presentations, “…not as a link,” (Kostas, Session II).

Parents of students in seventh and eighth grade received an email from their child’s English teacher prior to the cyber-bullying and social media presentation. Familiar with Hoover-Dempsey et al.’s (2005) research on teacher invitations, the English teacher invited parents to attend and provided additional information about the evening that was not included in the Pink Sheet. Elizabeth Kostas, who frequently attends school-sponsored programming, noticed that attendance at the Cyber-Bullying and Social Media Pillar Night was higher than normal and felt it had something to do with the teacher invitation. Mrs. Kostas also explained that reminders about presentations were helpful. As a busy parent she often made note of scheduled presentations, but later forgot about them. She suggested that some sort of follow-up in the form
of a direct email, a phone call, or teacher invitation would probably remind parents of events and increase attendance.

Several parents in the study suggested the school become more proactive in asking parents to attend programming. Citing the school’s pillar of *parents as primary educators* Tom Fulks felt that while it might be difficult to make attendance at programming mandatory, the school and community could possibly, “provide a little more peer pressure to get people involved,” (Session II). Mary O’Connell discussed the Parent Pledge signed by each parent at the beginning of the school year:

> Something I found interesting is that when you read the Parent Pledge you will see that you signed up to attend these things [programs] whenever possible. People don’t read that, but it is in the pledge…You can’t make them come, but I guess technically if you wanted to you could. This is a charter school, it is still a public school, but at the charter school we should have more leeway. I think we could maybe have a set number of hours a family needs to volunteer or attend per year. (Session II)

Providing detailed information about upcoming events and reminding parents of those scheduled events as well as their commitment to support the school was viewed as viable approaches to increase early adolescent parent attendance at school-sponsored programming.

**Future Programming Topics**

A program’s relevance to the needs of early adolescents and their parents was a major determinant of successful programming. Social media and cyber-bullying was of particular interest to the interviewees due to the ever-present use of technology by today’s early
adolescents. Marguerite Holland explained, “I think the topic of technologies is a particularly good topic. There seems to be a generation gap in the understanding the uses of technology and social media,” (Session II). Furthermore, interviewees felt the presentation was full of “usable material” (Hogan, Session II) and encouraged them to seek out more opportunities to listen, learn, and discuss subjects associated with raising early adolescents.

When asked what types of programming would be of interest in the future, the interviewee’s suggestions fell into two major categories: academics and emotional development. In regards to academics, parents of early adolescents were particularly interested in presentations that dealt with expectations of the middle school and transitioning from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school. At the charter school, middle school students move from self-contained classrooms in the elementary grades to a team teaching model in the middle grades. Jordan Jackson felt that cyclical presentations in transition years would benefit parents and help them better understand the changes their children were about to face:

I think that wherever, I want to call them leaps, take place [parents should meet]. It seems like around fourth grade, then at the fifth/sixth grade level and again at seventh/eighth grade…We as parents need to know when students are going from the three paragraph essay and so on. (Session II)

Tom Fulks also suggested presentations take place, “when there are changes in programs like the math program or the science program, the Mass Frameworks, or anything like that. Programs to help parents better understand what the changes are about,” (Session II). Parents of the school’s oldest children, the graduating eighth grade class also expressed an interest in more
programming coaching parents on the transition to secondary school. Diane Brown, whose oldest child was just making the transition from middle school to high school said:

I would really like to know what type of high school is best for my kid, what to be looking for, what questions to be asking – because when you’re going through it for the first time you don’t know what to expect. (Session II).

In regards to emotional development, the interviewees were interested in any topic that addressed the emotional and social pressures of early adolescence. Parents of early adolescents recognized that their children were complex beings and required special attention during this tumultuous period of development. The participants in this study also acknowledged that as parents of early adolescents they too needed support and appreciated any discussion that addressed the unique needs of their children:

I’d like to see programs geared more to the middle schooler and adolescence. A discussion of the emotions they go through, like lack of self-confidence, the lack of communication, and everything else that goes along with it. I think any type of talk on adolescence would be really important since they are so very different from the little kids.

(Hogan, Session II)

Other early adolescent needs that were mentioned included: managing anxiety; executive functioning and organization; physical development; body image; and substance abuse.

**Summary of the Findings**

The needs of early adolescents are unique and set them apart from elementary and secondary school students. Parents of middle school students recognized the many needs of their
children, but experienced difficulty knowing when to step in and provide support and when to encourage more independence. Parental practices moved from a more hands-on model to one of guidance where conversation and role-playing took on new importance. Academically, the parents felt their role was to support organizational efforts and again, foster more autonomy on the part of their students. Frustration arose when parents were unsure of expectations for student work and lack of timely communication with the school regarding academic progress.

Interactions with the middle school were viewed in a positive light by parents, but seemed to be lacking in certain areas. While the school provided many sources from which parents could access information about their students and the school, the parents felt many of the sources were cumbersome to navigate and the information provided often redundant or superficial. The interviewees sought information that was easy to access and provided more rich detail about their children and how the school was functioning. Exchanges with staff and administration were also viewed positively; however, the parents interviewed again noted the lack of depth in their meetings and voiced a desire to have more opportunities to know teachers on a more informal level. Parent needs for information and contact with school staff were recognized by the school, but the methods employed were lacking in efficiency and quality according to the parents. The school’s effort was apparent, yet remained slightly off the mark.

Parenting early adolescents was viewed as an adventure, ever-changing and at times mystifying. School-sponsored workshops geared to the needs of early adolescents and their parents were a welcome source of support. Well-designed programming on relevant topics increased parental feelings of efficacy, provided an opportunity for parents to dialogue with peers and professionals, supplied parents with tools to utilize immediately in their parenting, and
often widened parent perspectives. The myriad of benefits associated with school-sponsored supports its continued development and use for parents of early adolescents.
Parents and educators of early adolescents have a profound influence on student academic and social achievement. Early adolescents are faced with extreme changes over a very short period of time and are in need of continued support and guidance during the often chaotic period of development, however, research from the field of parental involvement shows that parental involvement levels drop drastically as children enter early-adolescence (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Ferrara, 2009; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003; Wiseman, 2010). The drastic changes in the needs of early adolescents leave many parents unsure of how to best involve themselves and effectively support their children. This research study sought to understand how the middle school could assist early adolescent parents in maintaining involvement levels and supporting their children through the utilization of school-sponsored programming.

By understanding early adolescent parent beliefs, experiences, and practices, the middle school will be better able to adjust their communication and offerings to accommodate parental needs. When teachers and administrator practices coincide and support middle school parental needs and practices, the students reap the benefits. The following research questions were explored in a series of interviews with eleven middle school parents from the James Renshaw Charter School (JRCS) to determine what were areas of strength and weakness for parents of early adolescents, the effectiveness of existing school practices in supporting parental needs, and the value of school-sponsored programming as a tool to meet early adolescent parental concerns and encourage continued levels of parental involvement:
1. How does middle school parents’ understanding of the needs of early adolescents and the parents’ confidence in being able to meet their children’s needs (parenting self-efficacy) influence their parental involvement practices?

2. What types of communication and interactions do early adolescent parents have with the middle school and how does their communication and interactions with the middle school influence their parental involvement practices?

3. How does participation in school-sponsored workshops improve middle school parents’ feelings of self-efficacy and their levels of parental involvement?

**Starting on the Same Page**

A major shortcoming in parental involvement research is the lack of a standardized definition for parental involvement. Within the same school or system different groups often hold diverse and in some cases contradictory views of the same construct. The absence of a common starting position can undermine efforts made towards improving parental involvement practices (Brooks, 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Ferrara, 2009; Wiseman, 2010). Grolnick et al. (1997) cautioned schools interested in fostering parental involvement levels to investigate cultural factors within the parent body, specifically their thoughts on what constituted parental involvement and the needs of their children. A survey of parent perceptions regarding parental involvement, especially with parents of early adolescents, is paramount in the school’s efforts to support parents and foster parental involvement levels.

The definitions of parental involvement provided by the study interviewees were similar in nature, yet distinctive at the same time. Parent discussions revealed their on-going internal conflict. Parents were cognizant of their early adolescent’s need for independence, yet remained
uncertain of how much support they should be providing. Key components of the interviewees’
definitions of parental involvement included being available to students; a general knowledge of
their children’s academics, activities, and peer group; and providing guidance to help their
children navigate the social and academic issues they encountered. Parents also acknowledged
that the needs of their individual children resulted in different parenting practices for each child.
With parenting practices changing for individual children and family styles, the adoption of an
exhaustive definition for parental involvement becomes nearly impossible. The lack of
specificity in defining parental involvement makes quantitative studies more difficult (Fan &
Chen, 2001), yet opens itself to a qualitative study of universal themes found among the
experiences of parents of early adolescents. Schools interested in fostering parental involvement
with parents of early-adolescents must acknowledge the cultural factors influencing parental
practices and adopt methodologies to accommodate as many needs of the parent community as
possible, recognizing that one-size-fits-all is not applicable to parental involvement
programming.

**Identifying and Addressing the Needs of All**

In their quest for independence, early adolescents continued to be influenced by many
factors and groups including their parents, the school, and their peer group. The parents
interviewed for this study explained that by understanding their children’s needs they were better
able to parent. The same principle can be applied to the school, by knowing student needs the
school is better able to accommodate students and by identifying the needs of parents, the school
is more capable of supporting parents. From a holistic viewpoint, the more knowledge each
group has of others in the same system, the better able each group will be to address needs within
the system (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Understanding how groups interact with one another, the
strengths and weaknesses of those interactions, as well as knowledge regarding the needs of each group provides the information necessary to affect positive change. Efforts of the individual groups can corroborate with one another leading to more positive outcomes for students (Epstein, 2011).

The Needs of Early Adolescents and their Parents

Apart from the infancy stage, children will never experience such rapid change in their physical, emotional, and cognitive states as they will during the developmental stage of adolescence (Eccles & Harold, 1993). The middle school years coincide with early adolescence and children’s and parents’ first encounter with the major developmental changes associated with adolescence. As a system whose goal is to support early adolescents in their social and academic lives, the middle school needs to work in partnership with parents. Parental involvement researchers have identified early adolescent needs to include biological and cognitive growth, social development, and the renegotiations of the parent-child relationship (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Parents of early adolescents specifically identified the following as areas of significant change for early adolescents that required parental support: the growing need for autonomy or independence; navigating the peer group; creating opportunities for parent-child discussion; testing boundaries; and the need for academic support, especially in the area of organization.

According to interviewees, parenting an early adolescent requires balance. The parent must be able to support the child when needed while continually fostering independence. Marchant, Paulson, and Rothlisberg (2001) found that families who parented by adhering to firm discipline that encouraged child autonomy coupled with a high degree of warmth and nurturing had more academically and socially successful children than strict authoritarian or overly
permissive parents. This method of parenting was echoed time and again in the interviews for this study. The interviewees stressed the importance of allowing children independence, and while often frustrating to address, made the most out of their children’s mistakes by turning them into learning opportunities.

*Addressing Changes in Early Adolescent Behavior.* The middle school years are often accompanied by a rise in delinquent behaviors and conflict (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003). The parents of early adolescents interviewed were confident that their children would make mistakes during this period of development and emphasized the importance of discussing those mistakes and reinforcing family values to prevent the same errors from reoccurring in the future. Parents were in need of reassurance, citing they often felt isolated in the problems they were experiencing with their early adolescents. The school sponsored programming provided a forum where parents could dialogue, share experiences, and feel affirmed in the parenting choices they were making.

*Scaling Back Assistance, Encouraging Independence.* As middle school students transitioned from hands-on assistance from their parents to accepting guidance from their parents, dialogue and conversation became the parents’ tool of choice. No longer invited into classrooms, or part of group activities their children participated in, parents had to find new sources for information from which they could later ask questions of their children or start discussions. Research among middle school students, parents, teachers, and administrators has shown students who have regular conversations with parents have higher levels of academic and social success (Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Hill et al., 2004). Parents interviewed noted frustration in being able to initiate conversations when they were no longer privy to the daily activities of their children and looked to the school to provide more information regarding student progress
and potential social issues. When parents are well informed by the school, they are more able to engage in successful and meaningful conversations with their children.

*Providing Academic Support.* Perhaps the area with the most likelihood for overlap between home and school is that of academic support. Parents of early adolescents typically experience decreased feelings of efficacy in their ability to support middle school students with academics because their understanding of pedagogy and curriculum is stronger at the elementary level (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hill et al., 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009). The structure of the middle school environment also made it more difficult for parents of early adolescents to support their children academically. The rigidity of the middle school and introduction of teaching teams can make communication regarding student academic progress cumbersome (Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003). Parents of early adolescents concurred that changes in the middle school design including multiple teachers and the reliance on students to share academic information made supporting their children’s academic needs more difficult than in the elementary years and resulted in far less parenting time spent supporting children’s academic needs. Parents felt their role was more of a guide than that of a tutor during the middle school years and spent much of their time working on organizational skills. A source of frustration for many parents interviewed were unclear expectations for student work. Not aware of specific guidelines for assignments, parents were unsure if their child’s work was considered appropriate for the age level, or if additional support was needed. The inconsistent return of student work with teacher feedback and limited opportunities for parents to learn more about academic expectations for the age level were additional problems faced by these parents of early-adolescents.
Parental Communication and Interactions with the Middle School

Previous research studies on parental involvement and middle schools have identified inconsistent communication between parents and the school as a barrier to parental involvement, in some cases leading to parent feelings of alienation from the school (Brooks, 2009; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Ferrara, 2009; Hill & Tyson, 2009). In contrast to the reported body of research, the middle school parents in this study found the charter school to be open to communication and welcoming of parent involvement. This difference in findings may be in part to the socio-economic status of the study participants and the study site. In the American public school system a white, middle class perspective is the norm (Bourdieu, 1989; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Yosso, 2005) and students who possess middle class values and knowledge are more adaptive and able to benefit from school life (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). The majority of interviewees for this study were white and all came from a middle class background. Additionally, the parents for this study exhibited a predisposition to parental involvement by researching public school options and enrolling their child in the charter school. The school’s mission also supported its dedication to the parent body through its pillar of parents as primary educators. Interviewees referenced a degree of knowledge, trust, and respect in their interactions with the school that unfortunately appears to be lacking in many other middle school systems.

Breakdowns in Communication

Despite the middle school’s attempts to communicate with the parent body, the interviewees acknowledged a lack of efficiency and depth to those communications thus hindering parental involvement practices. Ineffective use of communication tools has been identified as a barrier to parental support. Whether expecting parents to access information via
the internet in a community where home computers were scarce (Ferrara, 2009) or relying on early adolescents to inform their parents of school news and happenings (Wiseman, 2010) school efforts for communication are not as efficient and effective as they could be. By examining the cultural factors or needs of the parent body the school would be more effective in its effort to foster parental involvement.

Lack of knowledge regarding school structures has been identified as another barrier to parental involvement. Whether due to cultural issues (Brooks, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009) or lack of clear communication, parents are unable to collaborate with the school when they are unfamiliar or unsure with its protocols and design. At the study site, a number of parent organizations were formed to support parents, however, poor communication regarding the mission of the groups led to lack of involvement on the part of parents interviewed. Several parents interviewed discussed the need for more information about managing student anxiety. When informed that the school’s Parent Advisory Council (PAC), a group created to support parents of students with alternative learning profiles, had scheduled an evening presentation with an anxiety specialist parents responded that they did not know the program would apply to their needs because their child was not diagnosed with a learning disability. A service that parents requested was being offered by the school, but not being utilized because of poor communication and a general lack of knowledge regarding the school’s parent groups.

Another issue impacting communication between parents and the middle school deals with the type of information being shared and its form of delivery. The study site employed a weekly newsletter to update the parent community about events taking place in the school. The newsletter was distributed weekly via an email to families and to access the document, parents needed to click on an additional link. Unfortunately, simply providing information to parents is
not an effective form of communication. Parents in the study noted difficulty in accessing the
material, a redundancy in the information supplied, and a lack of depth in the content. Parental
involvement researchers also noted that school communications often take the form a top-down
distribution of information, rather than that of a bottom-up format (Brooks, 2009; Pleyvak &
Heaston, 2009). Parents explained they would be more apt to utilize communications if they
were more in line with their needs. The current format at the study site and communications at
many schools falls short of parent expectations and are underutilized. The effort on the part of
the school is clear, but appears to be a wasted effort if the parent body fails to take advantage of
the resources provided.

**Challenges Associated with Middle School Design**

Changes in the organizational structure of the middle school also provide barriers to
parental involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Simons-Morton & Davis-Crump, 2003). Parents
in this study expressed concerns regarding how student academic progress was shared with
parents in the middle school. In the elementary years, teachers sent home folders filled with
corrected work and assessments on a regular basis. In the middle school, teachers returned
student work to the students with the expectation they would share the information with their
families. According to parents, work and information was not making it to the home in a
consistent manner making it difficult for parents to support their students. Wiseman (2010)
found early adolescent students to be unreliable in the role of middle man between school and
home, further supporting the need for a different method for dissemination of student progress.

The team model of teaching in the middle school can result in less personal contact
between teachers and families (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Respondents felt they did not “know”
their children’s teachers as well as they did in the elementary years. School efforts to increase classroom communication included classroom teacher websites. Parents explained that due to lack of consistency on teacher websites, as well as the number of sites parents needed to navigate, the websites were an ineffective tool for parent communication and were under-utilized. Parent suggestions regarding the streamlining of information presented, as well as the layout of individual websites would benefit the entire learning community and increase communication levels.

Finally, parent and teacher interactions were limited in the middle school. Parents in this study felt they were welcomed at the school, however, parents usually needed to initiate communication. The school’s curriculum night in the fall was very brief and focused on the broadcasting of facts and policies. The next opportunity for teacher interaction was in late November at five minute parent-teacher conferences. Parents cited lack of depth in their interactions and feelings of being “rushed”. An opportunity for more informal interactions was requested. The middle school in this study and middle schools across the country seem to be aware of the needs of early adolescent parents, yet fall short of meeting their needs in an efficient manner. Parents need information from which they can support their students, but when the information lacks depth, is redundant, or hard to access parents don’t consistently utilize the school communications leading to frustration among all stakeholder groups.

**School-Sponsored Programming Supporting Parents of Early Adolescents**

The national movement to increase parental involvement levels has received heavy bipartisan support and was named as one of the six targeted areas for improvement in 2001’s *No Child Left Behind* (Mattingly et al., 2002). School-sponsored parent education has been many
schools answer to meeting the new requirements. Joyce Epstein defended the employment of school-sponsored programming by stating, “If these programs are well designed, responsive to families’ needs, and well implemented, they should increase parents’ confidence and the quality of their parenting,” (Epstein, 2011, p. 421). Well-developed programming should address the needs of several different groups within the same system. Today’s middle school not only has the responsibility to improve parental involvement with the parent body, but is responsible to evidence their efforts to satisfy federal mandates.

Traditionally, school-sponsored programming addresses two major topics, academics and mental health (Schaefer, 1991). Parents at the study site recognized the need for both kinds of programming, but seemed to gravitate towards mental health topics that dealt with early adolescent development, social interactions, and managing anxiety. Parents were grateful for past presentations on academics, citing their helpfulness in supporting learning at home, but spoke most highly of programming that focused on social and emotional development of early adolescents. Interestingly, parents noted that when their children were in elementary school their focus was more on academic presentations because social and emotional concerns had not begun to surface until entrance into the middle school. Parents of early adolescents appear to require more support meeting the social and emotional needs of their children than academic needs and schools should develop their programming in response to that need in the parent community.

Effective school-sponsored programming can enhance parents of early adolescents’ understanding of the academic and social needs of their children (Schaefer, 1991). Programming also supports parental needs. Interviewees found that school-sponsored programming affirmed their parenting practices; allowed for dialogue with peers and professionals; provided them with useful tools and conversation starters to immediately implement with their children; and in some
cases, made them rethink their parenting practices to be more aligned with student and school needs. Schaefer (1991) explained that providing parents opportunities to compare their values and practices with other parents contributed to positive change in the school system. Parents who had felt exasperation in dealings with their early adolescents (particularly in regards to moodiness and defiance) felt fortified by their interactions with their peers at the school-sponsored programming. Parents also noted that by coming together as a community of parents and teachers, they no longer had to rely solely on their early adolescents to provide information. Parents were able to learn from each other and be better prepared to support early adolescents’ academic and social needs.

**Providing Opportunities to Interact with School Personnel**

The relations between the middle school and parents were viewed in a favorable light by this study’s participants. Interviewees agreed that both teachers and administration maintained an “open door policy” for parents to voice their concerns and ask questions. This level of camaraderie is not the case for all middle school settings. Many middle school parents feel uncomfortable entering the school and interactions between the school and home can be strained (Ferrara, 2009). Despite labored relations, many schools express surprise when parents do not participate in school-sponsored events (Brooks, 2009). Parents need to feel valued and welcomed by the school teachers and administrators to participate in any type of programming or event. School-sponsored programming serves many needs of the learning community, but those needs cannot be met if parents do not attend the programming.
Increasing Programming Attendance Levels

At the study site, only a small percentage of parents consistently attended school-sponsored programming. Parents cited conflicts with work, busy schedules, and inconvenient meeting times as barriers to their attendance. Poor communication of events and lack of detail regarding the benefits of the programming were other factors that prevented parents from attending school programming. Despite the low number of attendees at school-sponsored programming, the interviewees stressed the importance of continuing to offer more presentations and educational opportunities for the parent body. Several parents felt that personal invitations from teachers and administration would be an effective strategy to attract more participants. A middle school teacher familiar with the concept of teacher invitations (Anderson & Minke, 2010; Epstein, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) sent emails to the parents of her students informing them of the upcoming event. Several parents commented that attendance at that particular program was higher than normal and they felt it could be attributed to continuous advertising of the event in several school communications (the newsletter, the website, and an oral announcement at curriculum night) as well as the teacher’s personal request. Interviewees also appreciated the attendance of school staff and administration at the event commenting that their presence denoted their dedication to the school.

Meeting the Needs of the Community

As a tool to foster parental involvement, well-designed school-sponsored programming is able to address a variety of student, parent, and school needs. Presentations on relevant topics provide information from which participants can make more informed parenting decisions and initiate discussions with their early adolescents. The workshop model allows for dialogue with
peers and professionals; often resulting in increased feelings of parental efficacy while building community. The uncertainties and frequent change of early adolescence causes many young people to feel isolated and confused, parents of middle school students experienced similar feelings of doubt and confusion as they learned to adapt their parenting practices to the needs of early adolescents. School-sponsored programming that can provide parents with the background knowledge to make informed decisions, provide information about their children’s social and academic lives, and strengthen the relationships between parent and child, parent and school, and within the parent body are an excellent use of the school’s resources and should be a priority in any school’s parental outreach planning.

**Overall Implications**

The challenges associated with early adolescence are mirrored in the challenges faced by the parents of early adolescents. Students, families, and the entire school community profit when middle schools make a conscious effort to support parents of middle school students in their parenting endeavors. Contrary to the expectations of many, parental involvement is not purely the responsibility of the parent. Fostering parental involvement is a community task and as many experts suggest (Epstein, 2011; Grolnick et al., 1997; Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001) families and schools should stop treating it in isolation. Creating a collaborative and cooperative partnership should be the true aim of school-sponsored programming so that all constituents’ needs are met with the children’s best interest at heart.

Developing and implementing programming that is inclusive of all members of the community requires continued research on community dynamics. Schools that have a solid understanding of the people in their community are better able to design relevant programming
to meet the varied needs of all groups within the learning community. Sociological inventories need not be exhaustive, but should take into account the customs and traditions of the people, population characteristics, existing communication channels, and previous community-school efforts (Moore, Bagin, & Gallagher, 2012). As school communities experience changes, schools should reevaluate their programming choices to ensure all constituent needs continue to be met.

**Recommendations**

For any middle school to be able to effectively foster parental involvement they must first identify the needs of the parent body. By identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the school’s interactions with parents, areas for development will make themselves known. In the case of this study site, the middle school was involved in many activities that they assumed were meeting parental needs by providing weekly newsletters, scheduling yearly conferences, sending student work home, and creating school and teacher websites. The interviewees acknowledged the efforts of the school, but found the school was falling short of meeting their needs. The problems with communication in the study site can be easily remedied by streamlining communication and viewing school practices through the lens of a parent. By utilizing an ecological approach, schools can identify the needs of sub-systems or groups and be better able to address the multitude of needs in any community.

During the course of this research study, the James Renshaw Charter School applied and was granted an amendment change to the school’s charter. The amendment change permitted the school to increase its size and convert from a district to a regional charter school. The school planned to double its enrollment over several years and welcome students from ten new communities. Large scale changes to a school structure require continued attention to the
community dynamics and ongoing sociological inventories (Moore, Bagin, & Gallagher, 2012). On-going evaluation of school-family relationships, communication channels, and school community demographics will be of great importance as the charter school increases its size and strives to maintain its commitment to support parents as primary educators.

School-sponsored programming is an excellent source of outreach when the topic is relevant to parents of early adolescents. Middle school parents were interested in gaining information about academics, but seemed more attracted to presentations focused on the social and emotional development of early adolescents. In a study of early-adolescent mothers, Grolnick and Ryan (1989) found that mothers frequently sought psychological resources to improve their parenting keeping in line with the desires of the mothers interviewed for this study. Suggestions to better advertise upcoming events, encourage staff to send personal invitations, or to have the school collaborate with other district schools and community resources are feasible approaches to boost attendance and possibly defray costs to the school.

As a means of community building, school-sponsored programming brings together parents, but it can also incorporate staff and administration. Parents of early adolescents were eager to have more informal interactions with faculty. Attendance at school-sponsored programming not only provides shared knowledge to participants, but invites different perspectives to enter the conversation. Attributes displayed in the classroom may not equate with what takes place in the home or vice-versa. Bringing families, administration, and staff together builds community and increases the knowledge base. The more information each group has access to results in better outcomes for students. When the school, home, and community are working together students benefit. School-sponsored programming encourages the intersection of home, school, and community.
Limitations of the Study

The findings of this research study on middle school parental involvement and school-sponsored programming were limited by the cultural make-up of the study site and its participants. The race, social economic status, levels of education, and family dynamics of study participants was consistent with the study site’s demographic composition, however, anomalies between the study site and middle schools across the nation may restrict the generalizability of the study findings.

A white, middle class perspective is the norm in the American public school system (Bourdieu, 1989; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Yosso, 2005) and those who identify with that norm are found to have more successful outcomes in their interactions with schools (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). The parent participants’ race and socio-economic status of this study offered advantages for successful school communications that may not apply to other parent groups. Additionally, individuals who have higher socio-economic status achieve higher levels of academic performance than those of lower socio-economic status (Ahmar & Anwar, 2013; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). The participants in this study identified as middle to upper middle class and all had achieved higher education degrees. Six of the eleven participants had earned graduate degrees, evidencing the participants’ commitment to ongoing education and their ability to perform at high academic levels. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found that parents who are better educated are more involved at school and at home with their children than parents who were less educated. The participants of this study, as white, middle class, and highly educated had a theoretical advantage over parents representing lower socio-economic groups and lesser levels of education when it came to dealing with the school system and supporting students. Findings of this study would be further enhanced if they aligned with parent
experiences of middle school parents representing minorities, lower levels of socio-economic status, and lower levels of education.

Other noteworthy characteristics of the participant group for this study included marital status and employment. Five of the eleven participants were homemakers, one parent was employed part-time outside of the home, and one participant was employed part-time and worked from the home. All eleven study participants were part of a two-parent family. The work schedule and availability of a marital partner to share parenting responsibilities can be viewed as a benefit to these study participants and limit the findings of this study when compared to parents who work full-time or run a single parent household. Concerns raised by participants in this study included lack of time to attend parent programming and their need to have their parenting choices affirmed by others. Single parents have greater demands on their time and frequently want for a partner with whom they can discuss their parenting decisions. Single parents, lacking the sounding board of a partner, may have a greater need for outside affirmation, yet are unable to attend programming because of their overloaded schedules. Further research examining the parenting practices of single parent households and how schools address the need of the single parent population would enhance the findings of this study.

Suggestions for Future Research

Levels of parental involvement for parents of middle school children drop drastically from levels of parental involvement for elementary aged students. The benefits of continued parental involvement have been found to benefit all children, regardless of race or social class; however, the findings of this research study are limited by the study site. The participants in this study were predominantly white, middle class, and highly educated. The parenting needs of this
population may differ from needs of parents from different areas, socio-economic status, and education levels. Further research regarding the involvement practices of parents of early adolescents in a variety of settings and with more diverse participants would strengthen the findings and support the need for further development and utilization of school-sponsored programming as an effective method for encouraging parental involvement for the parents of early adolescents.
References


Appendix A

IRB Letter of Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: August 29, 2013
IRB #: CPS13-08-07
Principal Investigator(s): Kristal Moore Clemens
Jennifer A. Kelly
Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University
Title of Project: Fostering Effective Parental Involvement: The Case for Developing School-Sponsored Programming to Assist Middle School Parents
Participating Sites: Head of School Permission Letter on file
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: AUGUST 28, 2014

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix B

Curriculum Night Speech

Good evening parents. I know that you are all eager to get into the classrooms and meet your children’s teachers and I need to run up to the 3rd floor, so I will try to be very brief in my remarks.

As Mrs. ______ told you, I’m Jennifer Kelly and I am the 7th and 8th Grade English Language Arts Teacher. I’ve been at JRCS for seven years and am excited to share some of my life outside of the building with the entire school community. As many of you may know from your students, I too have been a student for the last two years in a doctorate of education program at Northeastern University. This summer I completed my coursework and am now conducting a research study on how middle schools can provide programming to assist parents in supporting the academic and social needs of their early adolescent children.

The study will consist of two interviews (about 45-60 minutes in length) and participation at the school’s Pillar Night on October 29, 2013. The only pre-requisites are that you be the parent of a middle-school aged child at JRCS and can participate in the two interviews and school program night.

Tomorrow all families in Grades 5-8 will receive an email from me with several attachments going into much greater detail about the study, my role as the student researcher, and the role of participants. If you’re interested in participating in the study (and I hope you will be) please read through the materials and complete the attached survey. I would like to have several participants from each grade level, 5-8 and hope to have the participant group finalized by next week and start the first round of interviews shortly thereafter. Participation is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will have no bearing on your child’s status in my class or the school itself. Your information will be kept confidential if you decide to participate.

As you might imagine, there has been a tremendous amount of time and effort put forth into reaching this point of my doctoral program. I am very excited to bring my dissertation research to our school and hope the findings will help the school in providing the best programming for middle school parents and their students.

If you have any questions, I will be in my room (Room 14) at the end of the evening.

Additionally, there will be contact information for you in the email you will receive tomorrow. One note about communication, because this is a study sanctioned by Northeastern University, all email communication need to go through the Northeastern account address that you will be provided in the email.
Thank you for your time. I hope you have a wonderful visit in your children’s classrooms this evening and I sincerely hope you will join me in this research study that will benefit our students, families, and school.

Thank you.
Appendix C

Parent Recruitment Letter

September 20, 2013

Dear JRCS Middle School Parents:

It was a pleasure to see many of you at last night’s Curriculum Night presentation. For those who were unable to attend I would like to introduce myself and explain my reason for contacting you today. My name is Jennifer Kelly and I have been teaching at JRCS for the last seven years. In addition to teaching students, many of you may know that I have also been a student enrolled in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. This summer I completed my doctoral coursework and am currently recruiting participants for a research study for my dissertation thesis.

My research interest centers on how middle schools can better support parents in assisting their young adolescent children. The study will explore how middle school parents understand their role in supporting their children and how school-sponsored programming influences the parental involvement beliefs and practices of middle school parents. In order to gather this data, I need participants and thus, the reason for this letter.

I am in search of middle school parents willing to be interviewed on the topic of parental involvement, home-school communication, and the challenges of parenting early adolescents. Study participation requires a commitment to attend two 45-60 minute interviews and participation in the JRCS Pillar Night on Internet Safety and Cyber-Bullying by Dr. Elizabeth Englander of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center on Tuesday, October 29, 2013.

Attached to this letter you will find a Letter of Informed Consent that provides more detailed information about the role and responsibilities of the participant and researcher. Please note that your involvement is entirely voluntary. And your child’s status at school will not be affected in any way by your decision to participate or not. Your information will also be confidential.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please visit: http://JRCS.org/faculty/jennifer-kelly/ and complete the Parental Interest Questionnaire under “Ms. Kelly’s Research Dissertation” by Wednesday, September 25th. Study participants will be chosen and informed of their selection by Friday, September 27th and the first round of interviews will begin shortly thereafter. If you have any questions about the study, participation, or the selection process please feel free to contact me at Kelly.jen@husky.neu.edu and we can schedule a phone call or I can respond to your question(s) via email. You may also contact my adviser, Dr. Kristal Moore Clemons at k.clemons@neu.edu with any questions or concerns. As a sanctioned research study through Northeastern University I am required to maintain proper protocol and kindly ask that all
questions and communications regarding this study need be directed to my Northeastern email account provided above.

It is incredibly exciting to start the research process after two years of study. I am thrilled to be conducting my study at JRCS and hope the results will be of use to the entire community. I hope you will consider participation in this study and I thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Kelly, M.Ed.

Kelly.jen@husky.neu.edu
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are the parent of a middle school student.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to better understand middle school parents’ understanding of parental involvement and how middle schools can provide programs to better meet parent needs.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in two 45-60 minute interviews and attend a school-sponsored workshop (a.k.a. JRCS Pillar Night Presentation).
1. The first interview will take place prior to the Pillar Night Presentation and will last for approximately 45-60 minutes. You will be asked questions about your understanding of parental involvement at the middle school level, your thoughts about communication practices between the school and home, and your personal level of comfort in parenting middle school aged students.
2. The next phase is attendance and participation in the school-sponsored parent event, JRCS Pillar Night on Internet Safety and Cyber-bullying on Tuesday, October 29, 2013 at JRCS. The event should be approximately 90 minutes.
3. The second interview will last for approximately 30-45 minutes and take place within one-three weeks of the school-sponsored event. You will be asked follow-up questions from the first interview and questions about the parent event.
4. Finally, within a few weeks of the final interview you will be given a copy of your interview transcripts to proof-read for accuracy.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interviews will last between 45-60 minutes. The school-sponsored event will take place at the James Renshaw Charter School and will last for approximately 90 minutes. You will be mailed a copy of your interview transcripts a few weeks after the final interview for review. The review should take between 45-60 minutes of your time. You can mail the transcripts back to us in the stamped envelope we will provide.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
You should not be at risk or experience any discomfort by participating in this study.
Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help teachers and administrators develop better programming to meet parent wants and needs.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.
In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of your participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a parent. Your child’s standing in the school will not change whether you decide to participate or not.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Jennifer A. Kelly, Tel: 508.317.7296, Email: kelly.jen@husky.neu.edu the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Kristal Clemons, Email: k.clemons@husky.neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will be given a $5 gift certificate to Dunkin Donuts as soon as you complete the transcript review.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There is no monetary cost for you to participate.

Is there anything else I need to know?
You must be a parent of a middle school student to participate.

Signature of person agreeing to take part

________________________

Date

Printed name of person above

________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent

Date

Printed name of person above

________________________
### Appendix E

Parent Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Name</th>
<th>Number of children in grades K-4</th>
<th>Number of children in grades 5-8</th>
<th>Number of children in grades 9 and beyond</th>
<th>Grade your current child(ren) enrolled in middle school</th>
<th>What is the highest degree or least level of school you have completed?</th>
<th>What is your marital status?</th>
<th>Employment status</th>
<th>Are you currently employed?</th>
<th>How often do you attend parent-teacher conferences and Curriculum Night presentations?</th>
<th>How often do you attend school events at the school?</th>
<th>How often do you attend school-sponsored information events?</th>
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<td>3 times a year</td>
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Appendix F

Age and Gender of Participants’ Children

Numbers of Children by Grade Level in Participant Families

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<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
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<td>Elementary (Grades K-4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle School (Grades 5-8)</td>
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<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School (Grades 9-12)</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
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</table>

Note. M = Male Child, F = Female Child
Appendix G

Session I List of Sample Interview Questions

Please tell me a little bit about your immediate family make-up. (Ages of children, grades, etc.) and what brought you here this afternoon.

The term parental involvement has different meanings for different people. As a parent of two school-aged children, what does the term parental involvement mean to you?

Next, we will discuss your parental involvement practices as it regards to middle school aged children. You can refer to your current practices or your involvement levels with your older son when he was in middle school. What does it look like for you? Take me through your day.

Specifically how do you involve yourself in your middle school child’s academic life?

Their social life?

Being the parent of three children you’ve experienced parenting at a variety of different age levels. Please share your views on the importance of parental involvement with middle school children. (Compare to elementary/high school involvement)

As your children progressed from elementary to middle school, did you find your involvement practices and levels had changed? Please explain.

Do you feel your overall parenting style changed at all as your children progressed from elementary to middle school? Please explain or give examples of the ways you’ve changed.

Dr. Joyce Epstein is a noted researcher in the field of parental involvement. She identified six modes of parental involvement: parenting (creating a home environment to support children as students), communicating (utilizing school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programming and children’s progress), decision making (being involved in school governance, parent organizations, and strategic planning for the school), learning at home (helping students with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning), volunteering (providing help and support in the school/classroom), and collaborating with the community (taking advantage of community resources, interacting with other families, and awareness of the school’s roll in the community). Please rank what you feel are the most important ways to be involved as the parent of a middle school child and briefly explain your opinion.
As a middle school parent, have you experienced any barriers in supporting your student? If so, please explain.

Adolescence is a time fraught with great physical, emotional, and cognitive changes for children. Apart from infancy, children will never grow or change as rapidly in their lives. Many parents express frustration with not knowing how best to address their children or support their needs. When it comes to supporting an early-adolescent who is navigating these drastic changes how confident do you feel? In what areas would you like or need support?

We’re going to switch gears slightly here and discuss the school’s role in supporting parents. Do you think it is the responsibility of the school to assist parents in supporting their middle school aged students and do you think JRCS provides adequate support for parents?

When it comes to JRCS, what do you think the school does well?

Where could the school improve?

If the school offered more programming, would you attend? What would you like to see implemented?

Is there anything you would like to add to anything we have discussed this evening?

Do you have any questions for the researcher?
Interviewee Name, do you have any questions regard the research process or the information previously provided in the letter of consent?

Thank you for coming in for our second interview. Several of today’s questions will be similar in nature to questions previously asked in our first session. Please speak freely and you may ask questions at any time.

What was your general impression of the school’s Pillar Night Presentation?

What were strengths of the program? Weaknesses?

Do you feel the program was beneficial to you as the parent of a middle school child? Why or why not?

You mentioned in our first interview that communication between school and home was an area of concern for you as a parent of a middle school student. Did this program address any of those areas of concerns? How so?

Do you feel that this type of program supports your parenting style?

Using this program and others you may have attended in the past, do you believe attendance at school programming helps parents be more effective in supporting their children academically? Socially? Please explain.

Did this particular program help you? If yes, how so? Please explain.

What would you like to see in further programming from the school? What types? Please explain.

Having attended the workshop and participating in these interviews, what areas do you think JRCS needs to focus on in working with middle school parents (i.e. communication, defining expectations, and supporting parents)?

We’ve talked a lot about parental involvement over our meetings. As this study comes to a close, can you please define one last time what you think is effective parental involvement for the parents of middle school students?

Any other information you would like to add?

Do you have any questions or information that you would like to add?
### Parent Rankings of Epstein’s Modes of Parental Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of Parental Involvement</th>
<th>Parenting</th>
<th>Communicating</th>
<th>Decision Making</th>
<th>Learning at Home</th>
<th>Volunteering</th>
<th>Collaborating with the Community</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>5*</td>
<td>4*</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>2</td>
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</table>

*Note.* Values marked by an asterisk (*) were ranked at equal levels of importance by respondent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of Parental Involvement</th>
<th>Point Value Assigned by Interviewees</th>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborating with the community</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Point value assigned to rank order: 1 = 6 points; 2 = 5 points; 3 = 4 points; 4 = 3 points; 5 = 2 points; 1 = 1 point. Modes denoted by an asterisk split points. For example, modes tied for rank order 4th and 5th each received 2.5 points.