UNDERSTANDING FAMILIES OF NORTH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:
A NARRATIVE RESEARCH STUDY OF ONE SUBURBAN SCHOOL

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Abstract

There are many circumstances affecting the families who live within the boundaries of the North Elementary School district. These include poor nutrition, limited health care, drug and alcohol involvement, and lack of reliable and/or regularly accessible public transportation. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the challenges that primary caregivers of North Elementary School students face in order to effectively communicate with and support both students and families. In addition, the purpose of this study is to develop possibilities for building a reciprocal relationship between home and school to improve the academic success of all students. Three caregivers provided rich narratives of their background, current interactions with school, current daily struggles, current supports being received, and ideas that would increase participation at the school and in the community. All of the primary caregivers have children receiving free or reduced lunch and one did not speak English as their primary language. An additional interview was held in place of a focus group and opportunities were identified where both the school and the community could develop future engagement with those served by North Elementary School. The findings demonstrate that the school needs to provide instruction to parents in areas of math and writing. Community supports are needed with the most critical focusing on transportation and improved methods to apply for financial supports. This study illustrated the need for North Elementary School staff to communicate with caregivers in smaller settings to understand the needs of families and share supports for their children.

Keywords: Primary caregivers, parent involvement, school and community interactions, Maslow, Title 1 school
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“It takes a village.” Completing my Doctoral studies was only possible due to the support of my family and friends.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of Problem

“Developing school, family, and community partnerships helps all youngsters succeed in school and in life. When families are involved, students hear common messages from home and school about the importance of attending school, staying in school, and working hard as a student” (Epstein, 1994, p 54). North Elementary School has created multiple opportunities to build family and community engagement. However, the school has not been able to sustain regular parent or community engagement and presence at the school by low income and non-English speaking or English as a second language member of the school community. The North Elementary School is one of eight elementary schools in a suburban northeast community. The average family income is at the lowest socio-economic level of the town. Sixty-one percent of the students are classified as low income (fifty-seven percent receive free lunch and four percent receive reduced lunch). Fourteen percent of the students do not speak English as their first language. The attrition rate is ten percent for all students, ten percent for low-income students and twenty-seven percent for English Language Learners (ELL) students. Attrition is determined by grade from the end of one year to the beginning of the next year. Thirty percent of the students have unexcused absences greater than ten days per year. The other seven elementary schools in the district have attendance rates that are better than North Elementary School. North Elementary School is currently a level two school as measured by the annual Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. There is a five-tiered accountability rating system in Massachusetts where one is the highest rating and five is the lowest rating. Schools rated as a four or five are typically in receivership by the state. North Elementary School is a
school wide Title One Project, meaning it receives federal financial support that benefits all students in the school.

The non-English speaking families in the school face many challenges. Currently, there are no staff members at the school who speak another language, and there is not a reliable translation program available to communicate with families. In addition, many families need to utilize public transportation and many services that families need are not accessible by public transportation. For example, although there are two convenience stores and one drug store within walking distance of the school, there are no grocery stores or doctors’ offices within walking distance. The closest doctor’s office where Spanish or Portuguese is spoken is about one hour away from the school. Family activities at school are conducted regularly, but non-English speaking primary caregivers typically do not attend. Primary caregivers who do not understand the English language are unable to communicate with the school.

In addition to the lack of reliable and/or regularly accessible public transportation, there are many additional circumstances affecting the families who live within the boundaries of the North Elementary School district. These include poor nutrition, limited health care, and drug and alcohol involvement. The primary caregiver of the English language learner typically works two or three jobs.

North Elementary School has made numerous efforts to increase engagement in different areas, but thus far have been unable to sustain it. Because North Elementary School is a walking school, without buses, regular parent contact at dismissal occurs daily. Invitations to evening programs both in writing and through automated phone calls are used. Varying the time of programs to best accommodate primary caregivers’ schedules has been tried. Childcare for primary caregivers while they attend informational meetings has been provided, but not utilized
by more than one or two children. Inviting students to attend programs with their primary caregivers and providing dinner has proven to be the most successful effort at North Elementary School to engage families. However, regular presence at school and active engagement from primary caregivers continues to be a current concern of the school staff and the Parent Teacher Association. Participation in school events, meeting with and communicating regularly with teachers, attending Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) team meetings without repeated invitations or rescheduling of meetings are areas that the school would like to see improved around parental and community presence and engagement. The lack of engagement may be due to socioeconomic issues, communication challenges due to limited English proficiency, cultural beliefs, or primary caregivers not knowing how to access different resources. The school is willing to explore different methods or techniques to build presence and engagement of primary caregivers in the school after the challenges are identified. Identifying the challenges of the primary caregivers through their voices will help determine critical supports that are most needed to address the challenges faced within their daily lives and increase engagement with the school. Both will improve the attendance and academic success of the students while developing reciprocal relationships between the home and school.

**Significance of the Research Problem**

Communities with high levels of community engagement see greater levels of trust in schools, more support for new funding initiatives, and increased willingness to address the important policy issues that have an impact on student achievement (Chadwick, 2004). Chadwick (2004) argues that students who have active family involvement in their school life achieve at higher academic levels than those students who do not. Students, who live in a nurturing home, have stable attachments to adults and are treated with physical and emotional
respect, generally build a positive self-image and a compassionate view of the world (Cole, O’Brien, Gadd, Ristuccia, Wallace & Greggory, 2007). Positive expectations from others lead to the belief that our strengths are appreciated, people are good, and the future is open to positive possibilities. Cole et al (2007) found that children with secure attachments to adults are usually able to regulate their emotions and develop a solid foundation for adapting well at school. This can be extended into the school environment. Both home and school need to provide students with a positive and nurturing environment in order to develop students who have a positive self image, high academic achievement, appropriate school behavior and appropriate emotional reactions. However, the lack of parental involvement, poverty, violence, drugs and other factors that affect the lives of the students can impede the development of these skills. The entire community needs to be active participants in the school in order to develop successful and well-adapted students.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) legislation requires states and districts to implement programs and practices with a proven record of improving student academic achievement. The accountability requirements of the legislation result in consequences to schools that continually fail to improve student achievement. North Elementary School has not met the expected performance levels of increasing the number of students reaching proficiency in English language arts/reading and mathematics as required by NCLB. North Elementary School continues to be a level two school because it has not increased the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). The number of students performing below proficient who speak English as a Second Language, have a low socio-economic status or students who are special education continues to be an area of needed growth.
Despite legislation mandating improving academic performance, determining the needs of primary caregivers in the community are important first steps in helping students achieve success in school. Students do not learn when they are concerned with other issues (Cole et al, 2007). Some of the students of North Elementary School witness and/or experience drug raids, violence, primary caregivers working two or three jobs, poverty, and communication difficulties due to limited English proficiency. This study seeks to understand the challenges of the primary caregivers and to identify the primary areas of need to identify areas where North Elementary School can provide supports.

**Positionality**

There are many reasons why I am passionate about this research study, but the first and foremost is that I served as the Principal of North Elementary School for five years and I developed a strong connection to the families of North Elementary School. One-and-a-half years ago, I was transferred to another school, but I care deeply about the students and families of North Elementary School and want to understand and improve family involvement with the school. Being a white middle class male, who only speaks English, I did not have many of the same experiences or struggles that some of the North Elementary School families faced. During my five years as Principal, I had regular opportunities to talk to parents and students about the struggles that they face on a day-to-day basis. Feeding their family, finding transportation to appointments and food shopping, not being able to communicate with the school or complete forms because they do not speak the language or that the forms are not in their own language, difficulty finding therapists, difficulty completing Mass Health forms, and being kept awake most of the night due to police raids or a shooting are a few of the challenges that parents discussed with me. Because of my experiences as Principal and interactions with the community
members of North Elementary School, I personally believe there are specific supports that could be put in place that could help the families and students.

**Research Questions and Goals**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the challenges that primary caregivers of North Elementary School students face in order to effectively communicate and support both students and families. In addition, the purpose was to develop possibilities for building a reciprocal relationship between home and school to improve the academic success of all students. The following research questions guided the inquiry to help understand the perspective and experience of primary caregivers.

1. What are the lived experiences of primary caregivers of North Elementary School as they reflect on their own educational journey?
2. What are the lived experiences of primary caregivers as they currently engage with North Elementary School about their children?
3. In what ways can primary caregivers see opportunities for future engagement with North Elementary School?

Michie (2009) presents several questions that assisted with this research and helped to understand the families of North Elementary School. These questions served as guiding questions (p. xvii).

1. What are the issues that marginalized or disadvantaged people speak of with excitement, anger, fear or hope?
2. How can I enter a dialogue in which I will learn from parents about the problems and obstacles they face?
3. What experiences do parents already have that can point the way toward solutions?
4. What narratives are missing from the "official story" that will make the problems parents encounter more understandable?

5. What current or proposed policies serve to privilege the powerful, and how are they made to appear normal and inevitable?

6. How can I expand the public space - in the classroom, in the school, in the larger community - for discussion, problem posing, and problem-solving in order to encourage fuller and wide participation?

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. This framework served as a lens to understand the needs of primary caregivers in the North Elementary School district.

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.** Maslow’s theory explains that individual, basic needs need to be addressed in order for individuals to grow within the community and be active contributors to society. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs was developed by Abraham Maslow to describe the complexity of human behavior. Abraham Maslow was a psychologist who developed this theory of personality, which includes the five needs that motivate individuals to reach for new goals. Maslow (1943) created five levels of hierarchal needs with the physiological needs at the base and psychological needs at the top. Taormina & Gao (2013) define a need as a lack of something that is essential to a person’s existence or well-being. Only one need level can be addressed at a time according to Maslow. Maslow explained that each level of need contains various things that are grouped together because they are conceptually related. Taormina & Gao (2013) explain that the hierarchy is not simply a matter of valuing what is important, but rather whether one is physiologically deprived of something, which when
lacking, gives rise to the need (p. 157). Before the higher-order needs can influence behavior, the lower level or physiological needs must be substantially satisfied. According to Hagerty (1999), if the physiological needs are not satisfied, then all efforts will go to trying to fill those needs. When an individual reaches the highest level, he or she is able to focus on their legacy, the needs of humankind and how to make a world a better place (Freitas & Leonard, 2011).

The first tier in the pyramid is physiological needs, which include air, food, water, sleep and other basic needs to survive. Many of the students at North Elementary School receive free or reduced lunch. Further, they report not eating except when at school or at most eating only cereal when at home for dinner. Food pantries are located in the neighborhood and the school provides a list of pantries to families in need. In addition, the school provides dinners at Thanksgiving and holidays. There is a summer lunch program provided for all children eighteen and under. North Elementary does access grants and other community aid to pay families’ heat, water, and car repairs.

The second tier is safety. Safety includes security of environment, employment, resources, health, and property. Maslow (1943) provided examples of safety needs to include a place where can people feel safe from harm, a guardian or someone who can be relied on for help, an ethical legal system, and stability in one’s life. There are a high number of rental properties in the neighborhood of North Elementary School. Because many families of the school rent rather than own, they experience threats to their financial safety with respect to increases in rents, possible burglaries, and frequent rental turnover of neighborhood units. Similarly, because many primary caregivers often work multiple part-time jobs in place of a full time job with medical and dental benefits, they are unsafe with respect to job security, childcare options, medical services and regularly dedicated family time to support educational growth.
Students come to school sick and the school nurse makes the determination if the child should stay at school. Mass Health is the primary insurance for many of the students. In order to continue medical coverage, paperwork needs to be completed regularly. If paperwork is not completed, then the insurance lapses. The school nurse will often refer families to the emergency room in these cases.

The third tier is belongingness, which includes love, friendship, intimacy and family. Humans need to have interpersonal attachments and feel a sense of belonging. Taormina & Gao (2013) explain that if people experience social exclusion, anxiety may be produced because it is accompanied by feelings of social rejection, isolation, loneliness, and depression. This is an area that needs to be more fully understood. At North Elementary School, there are several fifth generation family members attending the school. However, there are also some without their extended families who work several jobs to send money “home” to other countries where their extended families live. There is very little diversity amongst those involved in the Parent Teacher Association and activities at the school. Families who are limited English proficient may come to evening programs but have been observed leaving early in the program or even before the program begins. People who are of different cultures do not always interact at North Elementary.

The fourth tier is esteem. Esteem includes confidence, self-esteem, achievement, and respect. Rouse (2004) states that self-esteem brings about feelings of fulfillment. There are two components of esteem: esteem for oneself and respect received from others (Taormina & Gao, 2013). Esteem is a tier where there are questions that need to be answered. Do people not communicate due to their inability to speak English? Is this the reason non-English speaking people do not attend events? Where does the school need to build more respect?
The fifth and top tier is self-actualization and includes morality, creativity, and problem solving. School employees and some primary caregivers see a problem with a lack of engagement and acknowledge that people are faced with regular challenges. As a school community, it is necessary to problem solve to address the issues faced by the community. Hagerty (1999) suggested that access to higher education could be categorized under self-actualization as higher education encourages creativity and knowledge generation. Primary education, in contrast, is focused more on skills training and more basic needs. Understanding the areas where individuals need more support to meet the different tiers in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is necessary to fully understand and support the students of North Elementary School.

Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs is the framework that will support the understanding the families who are faced with multiple challenges. It is important to identify the needs of the community, those needs being addressed and those that are not being fully met. As Maslow has identified, needs go beyond food and shelter. These frameworks served as a lens throughout the research study.

**Summary of Paper and Organization**

Sustaining regular parent or community engagement and presence at the school by low income and non-English or English as a second language members of the school community has not been achieved despite continuous efforts. Chadwick (2004) argues that active parental and community involvement is critical to increase student achievement and develop successful and well-adapted students. This research study focused on understanding the challenges that families of the North Elementary School face and identified where additional supports are needed.

The research study is organized into five chapters. In the first chapter, the problem and significance of the problem is discussed; the purpose and research questions are stated; and the
theoretical framework that frames the problem of practice and design of the study is identified. In the second chapter, the literature review is presented which shows how the thesis is grounded in existing literature. In the third chapter of the study, the research questions are reviewed, the methodology is explained, the data collection is outlined, the research participants and research sites are identified, and the data analysis is reviewed. In the fourth chapter, the narratives of each participant and summary of the focus group/one-on-one interview is presented. In the fifth and final chapter, the major themes that emerged in the narrative interviews will be presented along with connections to the theoretical framework and literature that supports this study.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

North Elementary School has created multiple opportunities to build family and community engagement. However, the school has not been able to sustain regular parent or community engagement and presence at the school by low income and non-English speaking or English as a second language member of the school community.

American schools won’t achieve their goal of getting all students to proficiency unless they attend to non-school factors (Henig & Reville, 2011, p. 23). The gap between the rich and poor in the United States has been growing larger since the early 1970s and the country has the highest income inequality in the developed world. There are large racial income and wealth disparities, especially between African Americans and whites (Condron, 2009, p 683). Many poor children have had little investment in their development aside from the care that their families are able to provide with limited resources, including, inadequate nutrition, minimal or no medical, dental or vision care, and living in a community that lacks safe places for children to play. Children are dependent on the schools and society to invest in them in areas where their parents cannot (Gandara & Contreras, 2009, p. 57). Sharon Johnson, a Principal from Cincinnati, Ohio believes that effective leaders understand their school, their students, and their parents. Pappano (2010) quotes Johnson, “Parents are sending us what they have. It is our job to make them the best we can. It includes, what do I do if you come to school with a smell? We can’t fix home, but I can fix things here” (p. 80). Johnson started by taking care of the students needs – if they didn’t have clothes, get clothes for the students. If they didn’t have food, feed them. She knew that their basic needs were not always met at home, nor would they be, so the school needed to take responsibility for those needs.
Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick furthers the belief of the researcher that schools cannot address all of the needs of families and children. Schools need to assist families to address basic needs to help them be more successful in school. Governor Patrick said in his Education Summit speech in November 2011:

All children need a healthy start – and when they can’t get it at home, we must find a way to provide it for them. Poverty begets a whole host of out-of-school problems that affect the readiness of a child to learn in the classroom. Mental health issues, family violence, housing instability and inadequate nutrition—all are real and present obstacles to student attendance, attentiveness and success. Teachers know it and they, along with school nurses, do their very best to help; but they can’t be expected single-handedly to solve such complex problems in the lives of their students.

Governor Patrick highlighted some of the greatest needs of our students that, if addressed, may increase student achievement and build supports for families. Throughout this research, the issues that Governor Patrick highlighted, including poverty, mental health, and violence, will be identified as affecting both students and families on a daily basis.

Students and families in many of our cities and low-income areas face such issues as lack of medical care, difficulty accessing resources, violence and unsafe neighborhoods, drugs, cultural barriers and poverty. Author Paul Tough (2008) has described the young people who inhabit the urban centers of many of the nation’s large cities such as Boston as lacking “the often invisible cocoon of support and nurturance that follows middle-class and upper-middle-class kids through their childhoods” (p. 24). Family and community engagement is critical for the success of families, students, schools and the community as a whole.
Benefits of Active Engagement

Chadwick (2004) states that communities with high levels of engagement see greater levels of trust in schools, more support for new funding initiatives, and increased willingness to address the important policy issues that have an impact on student achievement (p. 35). Epstein (1994) explains that there are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships with the most important is to help students succeed in school and life. In addition, partnerships improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and the community, and help teachers with their work. Epstein (1994) states, “When families are involved, students hear common messages from home and school about the importance of attending school, staying in school, and working hard as a student” (p. 54).

Chadwick (2004) states that there isn’t a set framework for developing community engagement. Each school is unique and needs to look at their specific characteristics. Chadwick (2004) has identified four phases that identify a successful community engagement process (p. 11). The four phases are developing a clear focus, identifying constituents, developing an understanding of the varied perspectives and developing strategies to encourage action.

Lewis, Kim and Bey (2011) state, “achieving parental involvement is one of the most difficult areas of school improvement in economically disadvantaged areas” (p. 222). One of the reasons for this difficulty may be related to the lack of pre- and in-service education for teachers on ways to initiate and practice parental involvement in the classroom. As a result, Lewis, Kim and Bey (2011) report that many teachers report having a lack of knowledge and experienced uncertainty regarding ways to encourage parent involvement. Teaching educators types of and
methods of parental and community involvement will build positive interactions between home and school.

**Community / Parent Engagement**

**Methods of developing engagement.** Many of our urban schools are located within a community, but they are often not “of” the community. Schutz (2006) states that many teachers do not live in the community and they are often not from the same race or culture as those living in the community. There needs to be more substantive engagement in the local community for a school to be effective.

In order to bring about improvement in student achievement, the total school community needs to be involved. According to AEL (2000), true community involvement seeks to harness the energy, talents and commitment of families, businesses and taxpayers. Stakeholder support for the school is increased because a large percentage of the community is participating in the school. Community engagement “requires the coordinating talent and skills of community members and school staff to work together to build higher student performance in the school, with the long run goal of making the community a better place to live” (AEL, 2000, p. 3).

Trust needs to be built in order to fully engage community members in the school. According to Moore, Gallagher and Bagin (2012),

…public school discipline is rated at or near the top of the list by the Gallup survey of public attitudes toward public schools. The problem may be real or perceived; it exists in the minds of the people who will help determine how much support public education receives (p. 4).

School leaders need to focus on services and offerings that appeal to other than those who are directly benefiting from the K – 12 programs (Moore, Gallagher & Bagin, 2012). How do we
build the trust of the community members? Perhaps it is as simple as thanking them for their support over the years or by reaching out and inviting them to an event in their honor. Their attendance would be one way to gauge their support and willingness to begin to trust us as a true school community.

Gupta-Carlson (2010) discusses ideas to remove roadblocks that marginalized groups have faced. Opening the school to artists could increase community participation in the school. Artists create mobilization of young adults in voter registration drives, the establishment of neighborhood based anti-drug, illiteracy, and youth violence projects, and the directing of youth from gang- or drug-related street activity to dance, art, and music production classes (Gupta-Carlson, 2010). In addition, Gupta-Carlson (2010) states that many artists make a living teaching bilingual students, work as counselors, and work as teachers. Hip-hop artists, for instance, build community and strive to earn a living through the practice, performance and teaching of their arts. Hip-hop artists are usually open to serving as mentors to others who were interested in learning or performing. These projects seek to improve the community, increase the involvement of the community members and improve social justice for all students.

Types of parental involvement. Epstein (1994) defined parental involvement as having six components: participating in parenting (Type 1); communicating with teachers and schools (Type 2); volunteering at school (Type 3); helping children learn at home (Type 4); participating in decision making at school (Type 5); and collaborating with the community (Type 6). Teachers can help parents participate in many areas of involvement. The effectiveness of each type of parental involvement has been supported by various studies that have connected it to students’ academic, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.
Type one parental involvement is the parents’ participation in parenting at home to support their children as students. Teachers can help parents to establish this type of parental involvement by providing workshops on parenting and child rearing, organizing training for parents, such as GED preparation, opportunities for college credit, and family literacy training, assisting in locating family support programs that improve health and nutrition, and doing home visits. Researchers have reported that parents who are involved in this type of parental involvement have children with better gains on reading and math standardized tests and fewer disruptive behaviors than children whose parents are not involved (Lewis, Kim, & Bey, 2011).

Communicating with teachers and schools (Type 2) can be defined as having effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and children’s progress. Lewis, Kim and Bey (2011) explain that teachers can help parents to be involved in this way by providing conferences, phone calls, language interpreters, useful notices, memos, and newsletters on school policies, reforms, transitions, choice of schools, and available courses, programs, and activities within schools, as well as by sending home folders of students’ work weekly or monthly for parents’ comments.

Volunteering, the third type of parental involvement can be defined as the parents’ help and support in the school. Lewis, Kim and Bey (2011) suggest that teachers can encourage parents to participate in this type of parental involvement by sending home an annual postcard survey to identify available talents, times, and locations of volunteers, maintaining a dedicated space for families involved in volunteer work to share resources and hold meetings, and establishing classroom volunteer programs, parent patrols, classroom parents, and a telephone tree. Parental participation of this type in children’s early school years has been related to the children’s improved reading achievement one year later and academic achievement and reduced
behavior problems four years later. Lewis, Kim, and Bey (2011) state that low- to middle-income African American parents’ participation in their children’s school activities is positively related to their children’s improved reading achievement.

The fourth type of parental involvement, learning at home, can be defined as parents helping students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. Teachers can help parents to become involved in this way by providing information on homework policies, skills required for students in all subjects at each grade level, how to monitor schoolwork at home, and how to assist students in improving skills on various school assessments, regular scheduling of homework that requires students to discuss with their families what they are learning in class, calendars with activities for parents and students to complete at home, summer learning packets, family math, science, and reading activities at school, and support for families to set goals for their children each year and plan for college or work. Parents’ engagement in homework is related to children’s improved reading achievement; increased positive attitude toward homework, personal competence, and self-regulation; and reduced behavioral problems (Lewis, Kim, & Bey, 2011). In addition, Lewis, Kim and Bey (2011) state that parents in Title I schools who have participated workshops that provided packaged materials for home instruction as well as parenting classes have seen their children accomplish more gains in reading and math achievement.

The fifth type of parental involvement, decision making, can be defined as parents’ involvement in decision making in school through becoming leaders and representatives. Teachers can help parents to become involved in this way by supporting parents’ involvement in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), advisory councils, and committees. Organizing independent advocacy groups to lobby for school reform and improvement, supporting parents in
becoming part of district-level councils and committees, providing information on school or local elections for school representatives and developing a network to link all families with parent representatives are additional ways to involve parents. When parents become involved in these ways, their children seem to receive fewer detentions (Lewis, Kim, & Bey, 2011).

The last type of parental involvement, collaborating with the community, can be defined as parents’ connection with the resources and services in the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development (Lewis, Kim, & Bey, 2011, p 223). Teachers can help parents to become involved in this way by providing them with information on health fairs, cultural events, recreational events, social support networks, and summer programs that are available in the community, integrating school partnerships with other service organizations and businesses, organizing community service opportunities for students and families, and encouraging alumni to participate in school programs for students and families.

Furthermore, Lewis, Kim, and Bey (2011), stated that when elementary school teachers gave out information or referrals for health and social services needs for their students, the students perceived that their parents have higher academic and vocational aspirations for them and would provide more help with homework (p. 223). Inner-city children whose parents explicitly used community resources for their extracurricular and religious activities were high achievers. When community volunteers became more involved in schools, students engaged in fewer disruptive behaviors (Lewis, Kim, & Bey, 2011).

**Needs assessment of the community.** There are many ways to gather information about the community in which a school is located. Moore, Gallagher and Bagin (2012) suggest looking at topics, such as: the power structure and the way decisions are made in the community, the expectations of citizens regarding education, opportunities and ways to effect better
cooperative relations with various publics, the channels through which public opinion is built in the community, and a listing of the types of organizations and social agencies in the community (p. 16). AEL (2000) suggests a “windshield survey” to further understand the community. A windshield survey involves driving around the community, making notes of what is seen, and creating a map of the community. After making notes of what is seen and creating a map of the community, one must reflect and ask questions such as: “How does the school district fit into the geographic area of the community? How are the settlements in the school community located in relationship to one another and in relationship to the school?” (AEL, 2000, p. 24).

Parker, Grenville, and Flessa (2011) examined schools and communities throughout Ontario affected by poverty. They visited schools, conducted interviews, focus groups, and analyzed documents. The purpose of this poverty project was to understand and explore success in challenging circumstances, but also “to examine the school in terms of the community and climate as perceived not only by the researcher but also by students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members at large” (p. 130). Parker, Grenville and Flessa (2011) discovered that an excellent school has a climate “defined by excellent teaching, high-quality leadership, motivated staff and students, and a sense of community” (p.130). The poverty project asked community members the following questions:

- **What** the school did to build positive schooling experiences for children and communities affected by poverty
- **How** those programs or policies came to be and how they were implemented,
- **Why** the programmatic direction was chosen for the specific school. (Parker, Grenville, & Flessa, 2011, p. 132)
“Schools need to understand the families and their community. Communities need to be given opportunities to interact with the school” (Parker, Grenville, & Flessa, 2011, p. 130). Several schools examined in Parker, Grenville and Flessa’s study held events, such as barbeques, multicultural nights, and movie showings, to bring the neighborhood into the school. The goal was to “bring families into the school and for members of the school community to reach out and work with families as equal partners in their children’s education” (Parker, Grenville, & Flessa, 2011, p. 139).

Gorelick (2012) worked to apply a systems approach and organizational learning tools to the challenge of transforming two schools in South Africa and two schools in Detroit, Michigan, into vibrant centers of community life. “Schools are engaged with parents and other education stakeholders to address the challenges of poverty, improve teaching and learning, and support students’ well-being and development” (Gorelick, 2012, p. 16). Gorelick’s goal was to help communities in a lasting and sustainable way without being prescriptive. They empowered the community members to identify problems and implement solutions through a six-step process that she developed. The steps were not intended to be linear.

Step 1. Build Relationships by reaching out to community members, groups, and organizations.

Step 2. Create a Vision by collecting desires for the school from its teachers, leaders, students, and the community.

Step 3. Assess “What” by asking all partners tough questions about obstacles and assets.

Step 4. Develop Pathways to the future by drawing a roadmap of how to get “where we want to be” by identifying organizations, groups, and individuals needed to support the journey.
Step 5. Build Capacity for the future by guiding school communities in becoming training grounds for the work they will do on their own tomorrow. Our commitment is to create sustainable local communities rather than achieve specific program outcomes.


Through the use of Gorelick’s six step process, the school can become the “central hub” of the community. During the whole process, the community is providing feedback that can be used to develop new goals and the school is always looking to improve through gathering of data and analyzing that data.

Parker, Grenville, and Flessa, (2011) acknowledge that getting parents and the community to work with schools is not easy (p. 145). “Each community has its own set of unique conditions and challenges. Schools must take the first steps towards opening their doors and breaking down the traditional barriers and hierarchies between schools and parents” (Parker, Grenville, & Flessa, 2011, p. 145). Community partnerships are the “connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to promote students’ social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development” (Parker, Grenville, & Flessa, 2011, p. 20). Partnering with community members is an avenue through which school personnel may gain access to resources in the community that they do not have within the school (Parker, Grenville, & Flessa, 2011).

Factors Impacting the Basic Needs of Students and Families

Violence, poverty, race inequalities, academic achievement differences and oppression are factors that impact the basic needs of the individuals of the North Elementary School
community. These factors make it difficult for individuals to focus outside of their basic needs. Outside school factors need to be addressed for students to achieve at their full potential.

**Violence.** Reactions to violence are likely to be similar to those of early abuse and neglect. Clinically, the negative effects of witnessing violence range from temporary upset in the child to clear symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Osofsky, 1995, p. 782). Patton and Johnson (2009) define exposure to community violence as youth experiencing, witnessing, or hearing about violent events that took place in their neighborhood or school (p. 53). Adolescents, males, members of non-dominant race or ethnicity groups, and low-income individuals have a higher probability of being exposed to violence (Patton & Johnson, 2009).

Osofsky (1995) found that during the earliest phases of infant and toddler development, clear associations have been found between exposure to violence and post-traumatic symptoms. School-age children who are exposed to violence often experience increases in anxiety, nightmares, and other sleep disturbances (Pynoos, 1993). They may have difficulty paying attention and concentrating. Both school-age children and preschoolers exposed to violence are less likely to explore their physical environment and play freely, showing less motivation to understand their environment. According to Patton and Johnson (2009), individuals with chronic and acute exposure to community violence have higher tendencies to develop maladaptive coping strategies such as hypervigilance and heightened arousal states (p. 55). Exposure to violence can teach new aggressive behaviors to children and reduce inhibition to act in a violent manner (Brookmeyer, Henrich & Schwab-Stone, 2005, p. 917). In addition, Patton and Johnson (2009) explain that adolescents who are exposed to community violence may demonstrate physiological symptoms caused by the allostatic response (p. 55). The allostatic response is an
increased glandular production, which releases adrenaline and other hormones, creating high levels of arousal, which limits physiological resources available to the body.

When there is regular violence occurring in their neighborhood, to their child or a child they know, parents may become overprotective, hardly allowing their children out of their sight (Osofsky, 1995, p. 786). Osofsky (1995) states that parents who are living with violence frequently describe a sense of helplessness and frustration with their inability to protect their children. In addition, mothers living in areas where the level of violence is high often teach their children to watch television lying prone and to sleep beneath the windowsills to avoid random bullets that might fly through the windows.

Pynoos and Eth (1985) estimated that children witness approximately ten to twenty percent of the homicides committed in Los Angeles. Bell and Jenkins (1991) reported in a study of African American children living in a violent Chicago neighborhood that one third of all school-age children had witnessed a homicide and that two thirds of them had witnessed a serious assault (Osofsky, 1995).

Patton and Johnson (2009) argue that the deindustrialization of cities in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s produced high unemployment among working class African Americans. The middle class left the cities causing concentrated poverty in poor black neighborhoods within the cities. Patton and Johnson (2009) further argue that this concentration increased economic social isolation and limited socialization linked to middle class work habits and socially desirable behaviors (p. 56). A concentration of poverty reinforces pathological behaviors associated with petty and violent crimes.

When working with traumatized young children and their families, Osofsky (1995) argues that one of the first issues that must be dealt with before any treatment can begin is
whether the child and the family can feel safe. In addition to witnessing and experiencing violence affecting the development of students, poverty affects students and families cognitively, socially, and emotionally.

**Poverty.** Persons with income less than that deemed sufficient to purchase basic needs—food, shelter, clothing, and other essentials—are designated as poor (Jensen, 2009, p. 6). Geography may play a role in defining poor because individuals living in one part of the country may not feel as poor if they lived in another part of the country. Jensen (2009) defines poverty as a chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse synergistic risk factors and affects the mind, body, and soul (p. 6).

According to Jensen (2009), there are four risk factors for families living in poverty: emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags and health and safety issues. One problem created by poverty often causes another. The effects of poverty on children’s cognitive development occur early. Poverty is linked to lower-quality parent-child interaction and to increased use of harsh punishment (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997, p. 65). Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) state that poor families are more likely to be headed by a parent, who is single, has low educational attainment, is unemployed, has low earning potential, and is young. In addition, they state that the rate of out-of-wedlock births among poor teens is almost three times as high as the rate among those from families who are not poor. Parents who are poor are likely to be less healthy, both emotionally and physically, than those who are not poor. Poor children suffer higher incidences of adverse health, developmental, and other outcomes than non-poor children. Low birth weight, physical health, and cognitive and emotional problems can persist through childhood and adolescence. Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) state that lead exposure at very young ages is linked to stunted growth, hearing loss,
vitamin D metabolism damage, impaired blood production, and toxic effects on the kidneys. Poor children often breathe contaminated air and drink impure water. Poor air and water quality are more common for children living in poverty, which can cause physical health problems and cognitive deficits (Evans, 2004, p. 86). Evans (2004) describes that residential crowding and noise have been associated with socio-emotional distress, elevated stress, reading acquisition, and injuries. Children living below the poverty threshold are 1.3 times as likely as children who are not poor to experience learning disabilities and developmental delays. Poorer children scored between 6 and 13 points lower on various standardized tests of IQ, verbal ability, and achievement (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997, p. 61). For low income children, a $10,000 increase in mean family income between birth and age 5 was associated with nearly a full year increase in completed schooling (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997, p. 62). Poor children suffer from emotional and behavioral problems more frequently than children who are not poor.

Low-income neighborhoods often have lower quality social and local services. There is often greater traffic volume, higher crime rates and less playground safety. Households are more crowded, noisy and physically deteriorated (Jensen, 2009). Children living in poverty spend less time exploring and spend more time struggling to survive. Jensen (2009) state that poor children have fewer support networks, live in neighborhoods with fewer positive social role models, and adolescents are more likely to rely on peers rather than adults. Living in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poor people is associated with less provision of learning experiences in the homes of preschoolers, over and above the links seen between family income and learning experiences (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997, p. 66). Low-income parents are less responsive, more authoritarian, and less involved in children’s school (Evans, 2004, p. 77). In addition, Jensen (2009) and Evans (2004) state that lower socio-economic children have fewer books at
home, visit the library less often and spend more time watching television than middle-income students. Evans (2004) describes that low-income parents speak less often and in less sophisticated ways to their children.

Poor children often live in homes where there is more turmoil, violence, and chaos (Evans, 2004, p. 77). They are more likely to come from single guardian homes and their parents or caregivers are often less emotionally responsive (Jensen, 2009). Jensen (2009) further states that students who live in single parent homes often have poorer school attendance, lower grades and lower chances of attending college. Evans (2004) states that students who are poor are more likely to spend time in foster or other care and are more likely to live in a family where divorce has occurred.

Family income correlates with children’s academic success, especially during preschool, kindergarten and primary years (Jensen, 2009, p. 10). As Jensen (2009) argues, children raised in poverty rarely choose to behave differently, but they are faced with challenges that affluent children never have to confront, and the brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions that decrease school performance (p. 14). Evans (2004) describes that low income students interact with aggressive peers 40% more often in their neighborhood, 25% more in child care settings, and have 70% more contacts with friends who are aggressive. High tardy and absenteeism rates are higher among poor students, which often correlate to a higher drop out rate. Attendance problems often indicate negative parent attitudes toward school. Poor children are more likely to attend poorly maintained schools with less qualified teachers.

Children living in poverty are less likely to have their basic needs met as Maslow describes. To grow up healthy emotionally, children fewer than three need a strong, reliable primary caregiver who provides consistent and unconditional love, guidance and support; safe,
predictable and stable environments; ten to twenty hours each week of meaningful interactions; and enrichment through complex activities (Jensen, 2009, p. 15). According to Jensen (2009), low-income caregivers are half as likely as higher-income parents to be able to locate their children in the neighborhood. In order to address all the needs of students, we need to look at providing them with engaging and stimulating activities after school. Educational researcher Reginald Clark (1988) has documented the importance of children’s participation in constructive learning activities during the non-school hours. He found that economically disadvantaged children who spend 20-35 hours of their free time each week in engaged learning (such as reading for pleasure and playing strategy games) get better grades in school than their more passive peers (Children’s Aid Society, 2001, p. 30). Students who are economically disadvantaged and students of minority races often attend schools that do not have the resources or high quality teaching.

Race. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court declared racially segregated schools “inherently unequal” in the Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka. According to Condron (2009), students who attend segregated minority schools achieve at lower levels that do students attending integrated or segregated white schools. After the desegregation of the 1970s and 1980s, schools have become segregated again. Schools are more segregated because those of lower income and non-white race often live in lower socio-economic areas such as inner cities. Inner-city schools have higher proportions of minority and poor students, while suburban schools have higher proportions of white and non-poor students (Condron, 2009, p 688). Poor and minority students who attend segregated schools tend to live in neighborhoods with high rates of joblessness, high crime and low quality public services.
For many low-income Latino students, schools are the first response system for any kind of social, medical, or psychological problem or disability. But much like the Latino students in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, the schools are lacking in resources and the social know how needed to garner more. Schools serving poor and minority students suffer poor physical conditions, overcrowding and high levels of student turnover that contribute to disorder (Condron, 2009). In addition, teachers with lower levels of education, certification and fewer years of experience are employed in these schools. Rather than address the disadvantages the students face, schools perpetuate them (Gandara & Contreras, 2009, p. 87).

Students of minorities often face an achievement gap that No Child Left Behind attempted to close. Often times, students having a disadvantaged social class background are placed into lower learning groups in school than their higher social class peers. Black students are placed lower than white students (Condron, 2009). This lower placement inhibits learning at higher levels. These placements can be seen as low as first grade. Students who are poor or working class are overrepresented in low-ranked reading groups and underrepresented in high-ranked groups.

According to Kaplowitz, Fisher, and Broman (2003), the mental pictures people have of various social groups have consequences and often result in stereotypes. Whites often see blacks as less intelligent, less dependable, and less hardworking than whites (Kaplowitz, Fisher & Broman, 2003, p. 237). Blacks are seen as economically poorer than whites and have a higher rate of out-of-wedlock births. The reality is that this is true. Kaplowitz, Fisher, and Broman (2003) explain that whites are less likely than blacks to believe that racial discrimination continues. Whites continue to express negative attitudes toward blacks. If these attitudes are
expressed, then a divide between the races is inevitable and can and will continue to be seen within communities.

**Medical care.** Language and cultural barriers leave many families afraid of, and outside of, the health care system. Many children have never seen a doctor or dentist (Children’s Aid Society, 2001). According to the Children’s Aid Society (2001), “In a community that constantly battles poverty, violence, drugs and crime, the need for mental health services is tremendous, and there has been great demand for these services since the community schools opened (in New York).” During the 1999-2000 school year, the Children’s Aid Society mental health staff scheduled over nine thousand visits with children and families for counseling for behavioral issues, domestic violence, addiction, immigration stresses, separation, loss and abusive relationships in the Washington Heights area of New York (p. 45). Not addressing outside factors such as medical care, poverty, and cultural and language barriers, affects the educational achievement of students from very early ages.

**Academic effects.** In 2001, the federal legislation, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed with the intent of improving student achievement for all students. Condron (2009) argues that it ignores a fundamental sociological insight identified more than forty years ago: disparities in students’ own family backgrounds (i.e., non-school factors) generate achievement gaps more so than do inequalities within and between schools themselves (i.e., school factors). Though there are significant inequities surrounding education, school reforms alone cannot eliminate achievement gaps.

Early gaps in literacy are seen when students enter school. For some groups, the disparities widen as they progress in school. Waldfogel (2012) explains that these gaps are particularly notable by socioeconomic status, race, and immigrant status. Black/white gaps and
gaps between children from socioeconomically disadvantaged and more advantaged families tend to widen during the school years. Hispanic children tend to close or stabilize reading gaps after a few years. The key factor in early literacy development is parents who create a home environment that may provide support for early literacy through the value placed on literacy and the access to reading materials that they have available in the home (Waldfogel, 2012, p. 41). Waldfogel (2012) further explains that children whose parents do not offer a home environment conducive to literacy development, do not read frequently with them, or have limited verbal interactions with them are at elevated risk of reading problems. When parents primarily speak a language other than English at home or are not proficient in English themselves, their children tend to have less exposure to English and thus tend to be at higher risk of scoring poorly in early literacy.

**Feelings of Oppression**

Social oppression exists when one social group exploits another social group for its own benefit (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997, p. 17). Oppression in communities and schools occurs with limited access to medical care, limited access to resources, unsafe neighborhoods, lack of understanding the language, cultural clashes, ethnocentrism, and a lack of awareness. It is intended that education be provided to give an opportunity for future success for all; however this is not the case for all of our students and families.

Oppression begins with the very basic needs – shelter, nutrition, medical care, dental care and vision care. Students may return home to a community that lacks safe places for children to play due to violence or drugs. These conditions cause their parents to discourage normal neighborhood exploration. Children are dependent on the schools and society to invest in them in areas where their parents cannot (Gandara & Contreras, 2009, p. 57). Their parents are not able
to invest in the children due to the oppression that they experience on a daily basis. Many non-school factors involve social oppression, including power imbalances, harassment, discrimination, marginalization and other forms of unequal treatment that are systematic. Henig & Reville (2011) state that the vision of the future of education reform is simple: American schools won’t achieve their goal of “all students at proficiency” unless they attend to non-school factors (p. 23).

Hardiman and Jackson (1997) state that the target group’s culture, language, and history are misrepresented or discounted and the dominant group’s culture is imposed (p. 17). Parents are often unable to receive valuable information about their child’s academic and behavioral progress, putting them at a disadvantage for helping their child. Values are often imposed upon the parents, which further oppresses the groups we are working with on a daily basis.

Stanfield (1985) discusses the importance of a culture of a population, which is what makes social knowledge meaningful to individuals and groups. He defines culture as the affective perceptions, normative standards, modes of subsistence, modes of communication, technology, religious beliefs, and political ideas which materialize the interactional forms which constitute life worlds of a population and its members (Stanfield, 1985). As Stanfield describes, each group of people have their own culture. School leaders must be aware of these differences as they work to create a cohesive and inclusive community. Stanfield points out that one needs to be aware of ethnocentrism or the group centeredness of human populations. Stanfield further states that ethnocentrism has both initiated and legitimized the unequal distribution of resources and privileges among human populations. As Stanfield (1985) shows, we must be cautious that the dominant group does not monopolize resources and force the other groups to adopt the dominant group’s norms and beliefs.
Oppression can occur when educators are not self-reflective about their practice and strive to understand the concerns, both spoken and written of our students, particularly those who come from marginalized groups (Bettez, 2011, p. 76). Bettez states that educators need to focus on community building and recognize that community building can be very complex, especially when there is power involved. Bettez (2011) argues that we need to create critical communities (p. 80). Developing critical communities helps us see where choices have been made and it clarifies whose goals those choices have helped. In addition, Bettez (2011) states that taking a critical lens helps us to question dominant norms and further one another’s critical thinking around issues such as power, oppression and privilege. Active community and family engagement has many benefits for both students and the community to address issues of oppression, to build cooperation and trust, to increase student achievement and to address challenges that families face.

Conclusion

Students and families in many of our cities and low-income areas face issues of lack of medical care, difficulty accessing resources, violence and unsafe neighborhoods, drugs, cultural barriers and poverty. These factors make it difficult for individuals to focus outside their basic needs. Many of these factors cause parents to discourage normal neighborhood exploration or enhance the academic needs of their children at home. Parental and community involvement in their child’s school is necessary for high academic achievement and there are many ways to develop active engagement; however the non-school factors need to be addressed to focus on that engagement.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Many studies have been conducted to understand how to involve parents and community members in schools; however, each school is different. Each school has different challenges and needs, so a successful strategy for involvement that works at one school, may not work at another school. Knowing and identifying the needs of the community may assist in determining the strategies that would help students to be successful. This study sought to understand the struggles and needs of primary caregivers who face challenges supporting their children at North Elementary School.

This study focuses on the research questions: 1) What are the lived experiences of primary caregivers of North Elementary School as they reflect on their own educational journey? 2) What are the lived experiences of primary caregivers as they currently engage with North Elementary School about their children? 3) In what ways can primary caregivers see opportunities for future engagement with North Elementary School?

The research sought to determine the challenges primary caretakers face on a daily basis. Common themes and frequent concerns were identified.

Paradigm

The constructivism-interpretivism paradigm requires an interactive researcher-participant dialogue. Throughout this research, the researcher attempted to understand the lived experiences of the participants from their point of view (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). In order for this to occur, the participant needed to trust the researcher or the participant may not have provided rich data for the study. During the research, the participant and researcher need to be involved in a two-way conversation where information and stories flow freely. The researcher should be able to make interpretations of the conversation during the interviews with the participant to ensure that
the researcher understands the story correctly. Quality interactions with the participants determined the accuracy of the study and the data obtained from the participants. Positive interactions helped to build trust and respect between the participant and the researcher, which encouraged the participant to answer questions more fully and honestly. The interviews were the main source of data, which provided the researcher with understandings of the research questions. Each participant saw different needs that will benefit the children of North Elementary School. Ponterotto states that the researcher’s values and lived experience cannot be separated from the research (but they are acknowledged).

**Research Design**

Creswell (2007) defines qualitative research “as a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p.4). “Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Creswell, 2007, p. 36). The participants shared their stories with the researcher so that their daily struggles and experiences were understood and their perspectives are valued. Interview questions asked participants to share stories about their personal positive and negative educational experiences as a student and a parent, any areas where it is difficult to provide the basic needs for their family, the challenges of balancing work, family and interactions with the school, current school supports that are being received, struggles or ease of communicating with the school, and the ease or difficulty of accessing medical care and other needed services. This research was conducted within the school, the natural setting, or in the home setting. Research was conducted face to face. As Creswell (2007) discusses, the researcher collected data using instruments developed by the
researcher. A focus was on understanding the experiences and lives of the primary caregivers of North Elementary School.

Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Creswell, 2007, p. 36). The lives of the participants cannot be quantified. This study focused on understanding the challenges for families in the school district, with a special emphasis on understanding cultural norms and school interactions so that the researcher can provide a lens into the daily struggles that many families face in supporting their children. This research may help school personnel increase their awareness and modify practices.

**Research Tradition**

A narrative inquiry research strategy was utilized for this study. Narrative inquiry research occurs when a researcher studies the lives of individuals and participants tell stories about their lives (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). According to Creswell (2007), data is collected from participants, individual experiences are reported and the meanings of the experiences are chronologically ordered. In order to truly understand the lives of the individuals of North Elementary School the stories of individual’s experiences must be told and understood. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber (1998) explain that a narrative study can be used to represent the character or lifestyle of subgroups in society, including race, religion, gender and more. These minorities are often discriminated against and not understood. Conducting a narrative study permitted the researcher to interact with the participants in order to obtain direct responses and permitted the researcher to ask follow up questions to more fully understand the different
perspectives of the participants regarding home-school interactions and support for their children at school and beyond.

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber (1998) argue that narratives provide access to people’s identities and personality. Narratives are a form of representation that describes human experience as it unfolds through time. These narrative stories are a stream of experiences that create and guide future experiences (Clandinin, 2007, p. 41). Webster and Mertova (2007) explain that narratives are focused on the complexity of human centeredness in research that attempts to capture the whole story of people’s lives and experiences. Clandinin (2007) explains that within narrative inquiry, both the researcher and researched will learn.

The participant’s stories served as the data in order to identify common experiences of the individuals living within the borders serviced by North Elementary School. The data can be used for comparison between groups to learn about a social phenomenon or historical period or to explore a personality (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 3).

Analyzing the participant stories involved developing categories and themes, which will be told in a narrative form of an individual’s life (Creswell, 2007, p. 79). Following Creswell (2007), the general structure of this study will include an introduction, research procedures, report of stories, individuals theorizing about their lives, patterns identified and a summary of findings.

As a result of this narrative inquiry, factors affecting individuals living within the North Elementary School district are better understood. Services to help the individuals be more involved in the school and permit individuals to gain supports that may not currently be available were identified.
Research Site

North Elementary School is one of eight elementary schools in a suburban northeast community. Approximately two hundred twenty students attend North Elementary School in kindergarten through grade five. The average family income is at the lowest socio-economic level of the town. Sixty-nine percent of the students are classified as low income. Ten percent of the students do not speak English as their first language. The stability rate is ten percent for all students, twenty-seven percent for English Language Learners, and twenty-three percent for African American students (Appendix E). Stability rate is determined by grade from the end of one year to the beginning of the next year. Thirty-six percent of the students have unexcused absences greater than nine days per year and thirty percent of the students have ten or more unexcused absences (Appendix E). The average number of days absent is 8.7 per year. Lack of medical care, scheduling appointments during the school day, not wanting to walk to school in inclement weather, and childcare are several reasons why students do not attend school. High absentee rates decrease the amount of time that a child is focused on learning. During the 2014-2015 school year, there were sixty-one logged behavioral incidents. One-third of those incidents were classified as physical altercations (Appendix E).

North Elementary School conducts an annual survey (Appendix F) of all the parents and guardians. There were sixty-one individuals who responded to the survey. Respondents had the opportunity to respond to questions by agreeing or disagreeing with statements, rating their responses and providing text responses.

Respondents stated that they liked North Elementary School because it is a small close knit, family oriented school with a great staff. The staff takes the time to know each child and provide a lot of one on one time with the students. North Elementary School provides extra
curricular activities for enrichment. Ninety-four percent of the respondents feel comfortable speaking to the staff about their child’s education and needs at school and ninety-three percent feel comfortable talking to the principal.

The top three priorities for change at North Elementary School over the next three years were identified as bullying prevention, challenging advanced learners, and increase student academic performance. Bullying needs to be addressed first because “not even the smartest student can advance if they do not feel comfortable to do so.”

Respondents rated safety in the classroom, on the playground, during indoor recess, in the lunchroom, in the hallways/stairways, during arrival, during dismissal, and in the restroom. Eighty percent or less agreed that their child felt safe on the playground (79%), hallways/stairs (80%), and restroom (79%). Eighty-four percent or more of all respondents agreed that their child felt safe in all other areas. Bullying was noted on two occasions out of fifteen added comments. One individual noted an issue about there being snow on the sidewalks requiring them to walk in the street, which was very dangerous over the winter. This comment directly correlates with the concern brought up during the one-on-one interviews that there is not any transportation to school.

Parent workshops in the areas of learning the new math program, understanding the school’s writing program and an adult computer class are of interest of the respondents.

As the prior principal of North Elementary School, the researcher was often concerned that there was not enough parental involvement from all of the parents. The same groups of parents were always involved and attended school events and meetings. In addition, the researcher was often told about the struggles that the community members and caretakers faced regularly. The researcher has always been interested in understanding the struggles that the
community members faced and creating supports that would benefit them, involve them in the
school, and increase the achievement and attendance of all students.

**Participants**

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select the participants. Purposeful sampling occurs
when “particular settings, persons or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide
information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). The study
was comprised of three parents. Parents who experience financial struggles as well as language
barriers were selected to interview about their perspectives and beliefs of their lives and
interactions with the school. Due to the varied populations that North Elementary School
services, it is important to take into account the different perspectives of most of the populations
serviced. The student population in 2012 – 2013, was comprised of 6.5% African American,
1.3% Asian, 7.8% Hispanic, 74.1% White and 10.3% Multi Race/Non Hispanic. Sixty-nine
percent of the students were classified as low-income. Though only ten percent of the students
have a first language that is not English, the percentage of primary caregivers who do not speak
English is unknown. All of the primary caregivers chosen had children receiving free or reduced
lunch. At least one of the participants did not speak English as their primary language. A focus
group was planned to prevent exclusion. The focus group, which became an additional one-on-
one interview met once to provide additional stories that will enhance the research and show if
caregivers have similar stories.

Participants in the study were interviewed three times for a period of approximately
forty-five minutes during each interview. In order for the participants to be comfortable within
the interview, a level of respect and trust was developed with the participant. In order to begin to
develop this trust, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the connections to North
Elementary School of the researcher. The participant, Mary, who did not speak English as her first language did not require a translator. She was offered a translator, but preferred to participate in the interview without assistance. She was able to comprehend spoken English and speak English most of the time, as long as others do not speak too quickly or use jargon/slang. If there were questions or discussion points that she did not understand, she would ask for clarification. Participants were asked questions to determine challenges faced on a normal basis, supports that they believe would benefit both themselves and other members of the community, ideas that they believe would cause them to participate in the school more often, and other questions that will provide the researcher a greater understanding of their lives, the community and family needs. Participants in the one to one interviews were provided with a thirty-dollar gift certificate to a food establishment located within the North Elementary School community after the completion of the final interview. The gift certificate within the community permitted participants to walk to the location rather than requiring transportation to access the location.

**Recruitment and Access**

The superintendent of the school district and the principal of the school were contacted for permission to make initial contact with North Elementary School parents/guardians. Written permission was obtained from both parties (Appendix A).

A paper “Call for Participants” (Appendix B) was distributed to the parents of students attending North Elementary School. Within the call for participants, there was a description of the study, the purpose for the study, and a short survey. The survey helped participants self-identify themselves as closely matching the parameters of the purposeful sampling. This Call for Participants was also distributed in Portuguese for those individuals who do not speak fluent English. Individuals, who were interested in participating in this study, were asked to place the
completed Call for Participants in a sealed envelope, bring it to the principal and the researcher collected the sealed envelopes from the principal. Individuals knew that though they were interested in the study, participation is not guaranteed. Participants were made aware that their responses were held in confidence and they will remain anonymous. Additional calls for participants were not needed to obtain participants from those serviced by North Elementary School.

**Data Collection**

Within narrative inquiry, data gathering can include surveys, observations, interviews, document review/analyzing, and conversations (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 22). Interviews/conversations and document review were the main sources of data for this study. Three interviews were conducted with each of the three participants to develop an understanding of the past to present to future. During the first interview, a historical perspective was developed. This interview asked participants about their parents’ involvement in their education and their personal educational experiences. The second interview focused on their current involvement in their child’s school and current experiences both with the school and outside of the school. During the final interview, participants were asked to think about the future. Questions focused on ideas that the participants have for future school engagement and ideas to help them support their child’s future educational experiences. Throughout the interviews, the participant were asked if the researcher’s interpretations of the responses were correct and sought more information or clarification about themes identified in each interview. A meeting was held with the holder of the records, the principal, to ask her to interpret some of the documents being analyzed. The holder of the records has an understanding of the data that the researcher could not have without being present in the building daily.
In-depth qualitative interviews were the primary method of data gathering. Semi-structured interviews in the form of storytelling were conducted. A number of questions (Appendix D) were prepared with possible follow up questions. Many of the questions were open ended to allow the interviewee to respond anyway he or she chose, possibly raising new issues and encourage story telling (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 29). Webster and Mertova (2007) explain that there are several key reasons for creating stories. These key reasons include: looking for consequences, recurring themes, lessons, what worked, vulnerability, and building future experiences. Looking for consequences involves the examination of the cause and effect of choices. Looking for recurring themes involves analyzing what actions occurred that represent ones values, priorities, concerns, interest and experiences. Looking for lessons is determining what was learned from actions that were made. Looking for what worked involves the storyteller recalling and reflecting on personal and professional successes. Vulnerability involves identifying mistakes. Building for future experiences involves creating scenarios for handling situations. Storytelling provides a complete understanding of the person being interviewed from the past to the present to the future.

Each participant participated in three interviews, which were conducted in person by the researcher. Before interviews were conducted, permission to participate in the study was obtained in writing and consent to participate form was signed (Appendix C). The consent disclosed selection process, anonymity, and the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). The interviews were conducted at the school in a location that ensures privacy, such as the school library or in another location that was comfortable for the participant. After the participant gave permission, interviews were audio recorded with an IPAD and smartphone.
As Webster and Mertova (2007) discuss, questions will be created to encourage reflection and recall of events. They further explain that good questions within narrative inquiry include sensitizing questions, theoretical questions and practical/structural questions. Sensitizing questions are those that answer the questions: What is going on here? Who are the actors? How do you define the situation? Theoretical questions create links by determining the relationships between concepts. Practical and structural questions seek to determine what concepts are well developed and those that are not well developed (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 85).

A focus group was planned after both the one-on-one interviews and initial analysis of the interview data. The initial invitation to participate produced more than three interested people who wanted to participate in the research study. Since the study design planned for only three individuals to participate in the one-on-one interviews, the additional interested participants were invited to be members of the focus group. It is important that individuals who are interested are included as one of the purposes is to understand the stories of the caregivers with the intent of the school developing reciprocal relationships. As a result of only having one participant willing to participate in the focus group to share her story, an additional one-on-one interview was conducted. The participant in the additional one-on-one interview signed a consent form for permission to participate in the study (Appendix C). The consent disclosed selection process, anonymity, and the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). The additional one-on-one interview was conducted at the school in the school gymnasium during an hour when school was closed to ensure privacy. After the participant gave permission, the interview was audio recorded with an iPAD and smartphone.

In order to further support the problem statement and significance of the study, school data was reviewed. Data reviewed included: demographics, attendance records, generalized
nursing data that did not breach HIPPA laws or confidentiality, and annual survey results. The school creates an annual survey for parents that identify areas of strengths and concern, which guides the development of annual goals. Nursing data was examined to determine reasons for nurse’s visits and ties to basic needs were identified. Attendance trends or reasons for absences were examined. Because there is a percentage of students and families where English is a second language or not understood at home, evidence of document translation was examined.

**Data Storage and Management**

Each interview was conducted in person by the researcher. The interviews were conducted at the school or another location that was able to maintain privacy. After permission was given, interviews were audio recorded with two different devices, an iPAD and smartphone. Pseudonyms replaced participant names and locations.

The researcher and advisor (principal investigator) had access to the data. Interviews and additional data were stored electronically with password protection and paper data were stored in a locked cabinet. Evidence will be destroyed three years after the conclusion of the research. These measures guaranteed the privacy of participants and protection of the data.

**Data Analysis**

Narrative inquiry is difficult to summarize in a data table. Understanding the entire inquiry is useful for both the researcher and reader. The data was presented to the reader utilizing the application of narrative sketches. Narrative sketches have broad descriptions of scene and plot and a number of sub-sketches including key characters, spaces and major events (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This presentation was similar to a memo form. It is often difficult to generalize to all the members of a community when utilizing narrative inquiry.
Analyzing data consisted of several steps. The first step included identifying critical events. These critical events were identified through the impact on the storyteller. How critical the events were became evident as the story is told. Critical events include events that are unplanned and unanticipated, occur within a particular context, have an impact on the people involved, involve life-changing consequences, and are intensely personal (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Webster and Mertova (2007) explain that it is important to focus on the quality of the event by reflecting on the meaning of the event in terms of the present and future.

During the second stage of analysis, open coding, the data was chunked into small units and coded (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Each event was identified and classified in one of four ways: type of experience, type of event, category of event, and effect of event. As Webster and Mertova (2007) explain, the type of experience is the strategy in which the event occurs; the type of event will include responsibility or area of decision making; the category of event will include the specific situation of a behavior during an event; and effect of the event is the feelings expressed about the event. Data from interviews was read thoroughly to determine meaning and to identify contextual meanings. The data was read again to see if initial analysis was accurate. After these initial two reads, categories (codes) for analysis were developed. After the data was coded, reread and it was determined that the data was coded appropriately, the second phase of analysis, axial coding, occurred. Codes were then grouped into categories. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) discussed that during the third and final stage, selective coding, and themes that express the content of each group will be developed. These themes helped to identify the experiences of the storytellers, the challenges that they face, supports that may be needed, and reasons that they have developed certain attitudes toward the school and community.
Saldaña (2013) recommends utilizing several questions to consider when coding field notes that were utilized: “What are people trying to accomplish? How do members talk about, characterize and understand what is going on? What do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes?” (p. 23). Each interview was coded separately, as suggested by Saldaña (2013). After reading the first interview and assigning codes, each subsequent interview was read. As previously discussed, while coding subsequent interviews, new codes were identified and then applied to the first interview. Saldaña (2013) states that each subsequent interview coded affects the recording of previously coded interviews. Codes were counted to further develop themes. A constant comparison analysis was utilized where data is open coded as the researcher attaches a code to each of the units. During the second stage or axial coding, the codes were grouped into categories. Finally during selective coding, the researcher develops one or more themes that express the content of each group (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009, p. 5). Thomas (2006) stated that clear links between the research objectives and summary findings are identified when analyzing qualitative data (p. 238).

There are many techniques to analyze data, including classical content analysis, keyword-in-context, discourse analysis and constant comparison analysis. Constant comparison analysis best fits the direction of this study. According to Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) classical content analysis includes creating smaller chunks of the data, placing a code with each chunk, then placing chunks into similar groupings and counted (p. 6). Keyword in context examines how words are used in context with other words and assumes that people use the same words differently, requiring this examination. Discourse analysis involves selecting representative of language use, several lines of a transcript, and then analyzing them in detail to how versions of elements such as the society, community, institutions, experiences, and events emerge in
discourse (Onwueguzie et al., 2009). Numerical representations of the codes were not necessary to understand the needs and experiences of the primary caregivers and administrator of North Elementary School. Keywords are important to this study; however how they are used in context is not the central focus of the study. Constant comparison analysis involves taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories (Creswell, 2007). Determining key themes and key ideas in order to make interpretations and conclusions from the data is critical to understanding the experiences of the people that create their viewpoints and needs.

Validity and Credibility

Validity is concerned with the research being well grounded and supported by the data collected. Webster and Mertova (2007) argue that the validity of narrative inquiry is associated with meaningful analysis, while the reliability is the trustworthiness of the notes of transcripts. Often, reliability refers to the probability that replication will yield similar results, but this may not be easy to achieve in narrative research. In narrative inquiry, it cannot be expected that the outcomes from one narrative or collection of stories will consistently return the same outcomes (Webster, & Mertova, 2007, p. 92). Extra care was taken to ensure that the notes are accurate. Interviews were recorded and an outside agency transcribed the notes to ensure accuracy.

There are several steps that were utilized to validate the study. Prolonged engagement involves the researcher building trust with the participants, learning the culture and checking for misinformation (Creswell, 2007, p. 207). The researcher was previously the Principal of the school in which the research is to be conducted. Relationships had been created that are positive and knowledge of several cultural aspects are known due to this previous relationship. For individuals involved as a participant with whom a previous relationship had not been established,
additional conversations took place before the interviews to create a level of trust and for the participant to understand the researcher’s background and purpose as well as the researcher understanding the participant’s background. Observations made by the researcher included notes on facial expressions and body language to assist in determining if the participant was being honest with the researcher. These observations were included in analytic memos that were written after conducting each interview, which are part of the data collection. In addition, analytic memos included first impressions, what the researcher noticed throughout the interview, and thoughts about what occurred throughout the interview.

Triangulation, the use of multiple and different sources, was implemented when examining documents to include the school demographics, economics, participation in events, and school achievement. As Creswell (2007) states, this process looks at evidence from different sources to “shed light on a theme or perspective” (p. 209). Triangulation was used during the document review, as it is almost impossible to use in a storytelling sense. Member checking was utilized throughout the interview process. Member checking involves asking the participant if the researcher’s interpretation is accurate and making adjustments to the interpretations if they are reported to be incorrect.

In order to further enhance the credibility of the study, the researcher conducted a pilot interview to test out the questions for clarity, comprehension, and the depth of the questions to elicit stories from the participants. The researcher had a person who fit into at least one similar demographic as those to participating in the actual study. The person participating in the pilot interview was informed that the interview was a pilot. Constructive feedback on the process and questions was received. The feedback assisted to see if questions made sense, to develop follow up questions, and to improve the overall process of the actual study.
Because the researcher was the former Principal of the school, the researcher has certain beliefs and positions about the lack of interaction by some school families. Commenting on past experiences, and biases, and acknowledging these beliefs helped clarify any researcher bias. Any biases were expressed within the study and interview questions were written to minimize the researcher’s bias and beliefs and truly reflect the participants’ actual experiences and perspectives.

**Protection of Human Subjects and Informed consent**

Research conducted was primarily face-to-face interviews. Participants were informed about the focus of the study and any questions were answered truthfully. Before interviews began, written consent was obtained and participants were informed of their ability to withdraw from the study. Individuals with limited English proficiency were offered a translator or given the opportunity to bring a translator/friend of their choosing. It is critical to have a translator who is fluent in the individuals’ native language for two reasons: to make sure the participant clearly understands the question being asked and to ensure that the researcher understands their response. Finally, individual responses were confidential and participants were given pseudonyms. Throughout the entire study, research included interviews and document analysis.

**Obtaining IRB Approval**

Clandinin (2007) explained that narrative understanding is emergent. Interview questions and approaches were modified slightly throughout the research. For example, some participants needed prompts to help clarify questions to answer or additional questions were asked to clarify the participants’ responses. Further, narrative research is conducted inductively, modifying procedure with further understanding, and strategies shift as themes are developed. Rubin and Rubin (2012) discuss several key areas necessary to obtain IRB approval: informed consent,
identifying questions to be asked, and the risk to individuals. All risks for individuals, of which there will be minimal or none, were determined. Clandinin (2007) argues that the ethical practice within narrative research involves respecting the dignity and welfare of others. The researcher focused on the “principle of awareness of and sensitivity to issues relating to power and vulnerability” (Clandinin, 2007, p. 558). Because this study had the possibility of involving individuals who do not speak English, the consent was translated into Portuguese. Translators were offered if the individual did not have access to or was unwilling to bring a translator. A professional transcriptionist was used and was required to sign a confidentiality statement. Confidentiality was maintained both during and after the data are collected. Throughout the research, the researcher did not coerce the participants to participate, informed them that they have the right to withdraw at any time, maintained privacy and maintained anonymity of the participants.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the challenges that primary caregivers of North Elementary School students face in order to effectively communicate with and support both students and families. In addition, the purpose was to develop possibilities for building a reciprocal relationship between home and school to improve the academic success of all students. This chapter presents narratives that were obtained from one-on-one interviews with three caregivers, who will be referred to from this point on as Danielle, Michaela and Mary, as well as the additional one-on-one interview, Jill. The children of those interviewed will be referred to by a name starting with the letter A, B, C, D and E. The oldest child will have a name beginning with A and the youngest will have a name beginning with E. In order to address the problem of practice, this chapter is divided into two main sections: (1) a summary of each person’s interviews and a summary of the focus group; and (2) a summary of data from examining documents including the school survey, nursing visits, behavior incidents and attendance data.

Danielle

“I can fall down a million times but I just get back up and just keep moving forward.”

Background / school experiences. Danielle is a thirty-five year old white woman with three sons, Aidan age 15, Brian age 11, and Cole age 8. Her children were born when she was 20, 23 and 26. She states that her family “is complicated”. She has an older sister, an older brother and a younger sister from her mother; however, her older two siblings have a different father than she does. Her younger sister has still a different father. Danielle did not know that her older sister existed until 2006 or 2007, and she has another stepsister. Danielle’s mother and father were divorced before she was born. Her father remarried around the time Danielle was
born. Her mother remarried but later divorced when Danielle was about 20 years old. Danielle’s older sister and brother often teased her by saying that she was adopted or that her real mother was dead and buried in Charlestown. While growing up, Danielle spent almost every weekend and school vacation at her paternal grandmother’s house. Her cousin, who was four months younger than Danielle, would often stay there as well. Unfortunately, Danielle’s cousin died two years ago from a heroin overdose.

For the first thirteen years of her life, Danielle lived in Boston before moving to a city south of Boston. When she lived in Boston, she lived in the “projects”. Danielle stated that there was a lot of racism in Boston, which she did not understand. Danielle stated that she would always hang out with Black kids. Many times other people would “want to beat me because I should hate them and I didn’t” or they would tell her that she “shouldn’t be talking to them”. In the first town outside of Boston that she lived, racism was not as apparent as it was in Boston. Danielle met parents from different racial backgrounds, which had not been her experience in Boston.

Danielle was constantly picked on because she never really defended herself. Instead of becoming involved in physical fights, she always tried to verbally calm her aggressors down. “People seemed to like me but I always felt more like a loner. Like I never really fit into one clique. I was just me. I'm still that way.” The transition from eighth to ninth grade was difficult because the girls with whom she “hung out” in middle school, separated in high school. "Oh because I'm gonna be a cheerleader and you're on the volleyball team and you're into drama, I can't be friends with you." This baffled Danielle because they had been best friends in middle school but not friends in high school.
High School was “social fun”. Danielle would meet up with friends at school and then “go off and do something.” Often Danielle would not skip an entire day; it might just be one class. She despised history, but always enjoyed math. As a sophomore, she took geometry. “I’d go in Monday, figure out what they were doing for the week. Not show up Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Go in on Friday, take the test and I got straight A’s through the whole school year.”

English during her sophomore year was her favorite. Her teacher “let them do their own thing within a certain guideline”. After reading Shakespeare, her teacher allowed them to write but put their own twist on the writing.

During junior year, Danielle was having a difficult time with “a lot of stuff” and saw the adjustment counselor regularly. She tried to overdose on Sudafed pills, which only made her really sick. Danielle’s parents were called. Her father went, and Danielle thinks that “was the one time my father actually did something for me at school.” Danielle’s mother chose not to go to the school. When Danielle was eighteen, she was arrested for possession of a Class D substance. Her mother would not take the phone call to bail her out.

Danielle dropped out of high school because “they were going to hold (her) back for attendance purposes”. She earned her GED (General Education Diploma) before the rest of her class graduated from high school. Danielle wishes she “knew then what I know now and actually applied myself because I was in all honors classes and not even doing any work. I could have been in advanced classes and done more:

My mother likes to tell me I'm the worst of her kids, which is not true. I've just always known what I wanted in life, knew where I wanted to go, which is nowhere where I am. I'm very independent anyways so when I'm being forced to do things her way or the highway and she didn't want to listen to me at all about things. I wasn't doing anything
bad. There'd be nights that I'd come in and she'd accuse me of being drunk or high or something and most times that she asked were the nights I actually wasn't doing anything. I did end up smoking a lot of pot when I was younger but- I was a pretty good kid. I would come home after school. I'd have a long list of things I was supposed to do around the house on top of my homework that she created. And if there was one thing I didn't do on the list, I was a horrible daughter and I didn't do anything all day. God forbid there weren't lines in the rug when I vacuumed. Stuff like that.

Danielle was and continues to be very independent. At sixteen she got a job and often paid for everything that she needed including clothes, deodorant, and other such things. Her mother received child support, but said she never had any money. One summer, Danielle spent “a chunk of money entertaining” her sister, but when it came time for school clothes, her mother said, “Well I’m not buying you anything, use your own money.” Danielle thought, “might as well be on my own and not have to listen to the rules”. At seventeen, Danielle had enough and moved out. She bounced around between different friends’ houses. Right before becoming pregnant, she moved home, moved out, and back home again before her child was born. Shortly after giving birth again, she and her child moved out. They were homeless and lived three months in a “lovely roach-infested motel” in Southeastern Massachusetts. Danielle qualified to receive Section 8 housing assistance at this time. Danielle then married the father of her second and third child.

A year after earning her GED, Danielle started at a community college where she was pursuing an associate’s degree in business. She graduated when she was six months pregnant with her second child. When her second child was a year old, she started attending a University, but it was too difficult to go to school with such young children. Within the past few years,
Danielle started to attend another University, but had to stop after about eight months when she separated from her husband. Math with a minor in Actuarial Science were her areas of study. Danielle originally wanted to be a middle school or high school math teacher. However, she gets very nervous talking in front of groups, so she changed her major. “I don't think I could be a teacher anyways. I have trouble liking other people's kids sometimes.”

Danielle learned how “not to be a parent through my mother and father.” Danielle’s mother lives with her now, but “she wasn’t a very good mother”. When “we were younger, she used to work three different jobs, like Payless, D'Angelo's, and I think it was Burger King.” During the summer, when they had the free concerts in Boston, her mother would work there and frequently take the children. If she could get rid of the three older children, she would. Her mother would bring the two older children to their father and Danielle would go to her grandmother’s. Danielle does not have a good relationship with her father because he gives her the impression that “I was an alcoholic and drug addict and now I know everything”. There is nothing that Danielle can do that is good enough in his eyes.

Danielle and her husband were just separated. On the day of our first interview, Danielle picked up the paperwork for filing divorce. She said her husband, “had two years to fix what was wrong and he didn't”. She stated that her two older children could care less because they don't like her husband at all. “That has more to do with the way he talks to them.” The youngest child is too young to really understand. The children are a lot easier to deal with without her husband around as the boys have a lot more respect for Danielle. “They listen to me more because I treat them like they're actual grownup people and not little jerks who don't know anything.”
**Current interactions with school.** Danielle loves North Elementary School. Danielle said, “being in such a small school, you kind of get to know the teachers and they get to know you too.” She believes that helps when problems arise.

When Aidan went to the middle school, he was on an Individualized Education Plan for occupational therapy:

All they did with him was teach him how to type. They weren’t working with him at all and they were pulling him out in the middle of tests to do this, so I ended up taking him off of it.

Danielle did not care for the home/school communication at the middle school. She did not know that Aidan was about to flunk. During January of his seventh grade year, Danielle called a meeting because her son was doing poorly. A friend told Danielle to try and get him on a 504 because he had ADHD:

And then I was made to feel like a horrible mother because I wasn't right up his butt checking every little thing that he did. He was 12. He should have been at that point where he needed to take responsibility. They made me cry.

However, during a meeting when Aidan was in eighth grade, everything that she had said about him taking responsibility and not being able to sit on him was said by the eighth grade teachers.

Right now, Danielle feels that no matter what she tries to do with him, he is going to “do what he is going to do and there’s nothing we can do about it.” Danielle feels he is smart enough to decide what he wants to do with his life and get a decent job.

Danielle said that Brian is the self-sufficient one. However, during the middle of this past school year [fifth grade], Danielle learned that although he said he was doing his homework,
the teacher said he was not completing it. Her solution was to have him stay inside during recess to complete the work. Danielle was okay with this as long as the homework is done.

Danielle reported that she and the principal of North Elementary School “really butt heads” last year. Danielle said: “She called DCF on me, claiming that I was picking my children up from school drunk. Like, why would she let them go home with me if she thought I was drunk to begin with?”

Danielle felt Cole was constantly just being watched. Every little thing that he did, the principal was right there. This drove Danielle crazy and “started making him act up more because that's what kids do when they feel like they don't have anywhere to go.” Cole has a very vivid imagination. Danielle told the principal not to engage with him in storytelling. However, she did. In the stories, Cole would explain that he is a werewolf and goes hunting at night. Another story would include how he and his brothers go out with machetes and guns and hide in the bushes. Danielle said that the majority of the time the stories were to get out of what he didn't want to do. In October 2014, Danielle asked for Cole to be switched out of the class that he was in because there were too many students in the classroom. There were other issues and Danielle felt that the teacher was not able to handle the situation. “I went in there and it was nothing but chaos, and if I was in that room all day, I'd be crazy too.” In March, they switched him out of the classroom and things were much better with the new teacher, although everything was not perfect.

In addition to the classroom change, Cole was prescribed Ritalin. His behavior has significantly improved. Danielle used to give the boys a break after school to have a snack and “just kind of relax”. However, now as soon as Cole gets home from school, he says, “I'm going to do my homework really fast.” The boys have chores; he also self-starts those. When the boys
complete their homework and chores, they earn one hour of computer or video game time.

Danielle says she was ready to pull out her hair before Cole started on the medication because it was a constant battle every single day.

**Challenges and dealing with those challenges.**

I just feel like a lot of people, because I'm poor, and you know, they just automatically assume that somehow my kid's neglected, or I'm a drug addict, or I'm not a good parent. And that really annoys me. So that just drives me nuts.

Often times, Danielle needs to decide between paying the rent on time and paying the cable bill. Paying the cable bill makes her mother happy. She explained that she did not have cable or internet for over a year, maybe even closer to two years and then her mother moved in to the house. Her mother told her “don’t worry about it, I’ll pay for it”. Danielle thinks she paid for it once. The bill is about one hundred twenty dollars a month. Danielle knows that she could get Internet really cheap, but she owes for cable, so she cannot apply. Most of Aidan’s homework is online now, which makes it very difficult to be without cable. The teachers know they did not have internet before her mother moved in and would allow her son to stay after school.

“Transportation is just horrible, with me and [her husband] splitting.” If Danielle owned a car, she would not depend on him for transportation. She said, “He’d be gone if I had a car myself.” Last year, there was a robotics competition on the other side of town, which Danielle missed because she had to send her son with a friend due to lack of transportation. The boys’ pediatrician is about an hour away. Danielle really likes this pediatrician because they have sick visits on the weekends and holidays, as well as “being amazing and he genuinely cares and you don’t find that anymore”. With Cole having ADHD, Danielle has to go to the pediatrician every
month to pick up the prescription and every three months Cole needs to see the doctor. In addition, Danielle needs to get to the fuel assistance office, which is across town, and the housing office, which is about an hour drive. The lack of transportation also limits the activities in which the children can participate. “At one point, the boys were doing soccer, and that’s when I had money and a car.” Brian would like to participate in a sport, but without a car that is not possible. He would be eligible to receive a partial scholarship to play but since he is not able to get to practices and games, it is a moot point. Aidan is angry with her for not allowing him to play football. However, it requires travelling to the games. Danielle was able to obtain a job because she can walk to it, although she would like to have a “bigger girl job than that”. Without reliable public or private transportation, Danielle is limited as to where she can go and what she can do for work.

On Fridays, Brian participated in school band before school. Because of the size of North Elementary School, the school district combined the bands of North Elementary School and a nearby [about one mile away] elementary school. However, the practice was scheduled to take place at the nearby school. Danielle had a problem getting Brian to the practice and then returning him to school. A woman in the neighborhood drove Danielle’s son along with her own daughter to practice and to school. In addition, when Danielle got a job in January, she asked the woman if she would watch Cole and bring him to school as well. The woman agreed. Danielle offered her money, but she would not take it. Next year, Brian will be in the middle school. Getting him to practice will not be a problem because band is during the school day. There is a band program over the summer, which Danielle was told would be paid for with a scholarship. However, again, the problem is transportation. “So unless I know someone who's going, he
misses out and it stinks. And I'm not going to be able to get a car, probably, until taxes next year. So that's a whole 'nother year of waiting."

**Community support.** Danielle currently receives fuel assistance, housing assistance, food stamps and cash benefits. Fuel assistance provides a discounted rate on her gas and electric bill. Any assistance requires “you to jump through so many hoops to get it and prove that you’re able to get it.” If you do not turn in the paperwork, then benefits stop. For a brief period of time, Danielle worked at Cumberland Farms. She never saw a check or paystub. She received a money order. Because she never received a paystub, she could not turn them in to the housing office. This threatened the continuation of her housing allowance. Danielle was thankful that the people at the housing office knew her and continued her housing assistance. Danielle started going to her housing office in 2001 when she and Aidan became homeless. They were living in a motel several miles away from the office and they needed to walk because they did not have a car. Currently, Danielle’s rent is $1,350. With assistance she only has to pay $272 per month. Danielle does not even earn the total of her rent per month.

Currently, Danielle receives $645 a month for food. Her mother receives $191 for food. “So there’s a lot of money” [for food]. Food stamps require one to reapply every six months.

Danielle receives cash assistance, but this assistance prevents her from saving money. Danielle said “you could save at most $2,500 before they start hitting you with, ‘you have too much money, why do you need this?’ ” At tax time, when she received the earned income credit, she and her husband received a $10,000 return. “I’ve got to spend it! I’ve got to figure out or I’ve got to ask someone to put it in a bank account because otherwise it affects me”.

“And that’s why I feel like the system’s set up to make people reliant on it.” Danielle believes you should be encouraging people to save their money so they can buy a house and
become self-sufficient. She said that you cannot have a savings in excess of $2,500. If your savings exceed $2,500 then you get penalized. In addition, if one is receiving cash benefits and has a car, they will ask how much the car is worth, how much one owes on it, and if it exceeds that money limit, you will not qualify for cash benefits. Before working at a local coffee shop, Danielle received $491 in cash benefits every month for four people. Now she is earning between $200 and $250 per week at the coffee show, but she cannot put it into a savings account.

Mass Health covers both medical and dental coverage. For about fifteen years, Danielle and her family have been covered by Mass Health. Dental coverage for children includes most everything, but adult coverage varies year to year. Because Mass Health is not paying for fillings, Danielle’s teeth have deteriorated to the point that they need to be extracted. Fillings may be covered at other times when she does not need them. At one point when Danielle was making eighteen dollars per hour, she lost Mass Health because she worked too many hours. When she worked one hour less per week, Danielle was able to get Mass Health reinstated.

During this time, Danielle kind of played the system. She did not submit any of her pay stubs in order to continue receiving benefits.

Support network. Danielle has created a support network that allows her to work and spend a lot of time with the kids, which is a huge priority for her. “If I need help, I'm going to get it.” When Danielle needs to go food shopping, she will call a friend and ask them to take her or ask to borrow their car. It took Danielle a while to ask anybody for help, even people she had known for a period of time. Danielle does not want her children to suffer, so she will do what she has to for them.

Opportunities for future engagement with the school and community. The events that the Parent Teacher Association conducts bring a “good chunk of the families in”. Working at the
local coffee shop, Danielle sees a lot of people/parents who cannot speak English. She thinks that this might be a hindrance to attending school events because no one is going to be able to understand them. If there could be someone [possibly an interpreter] who speaks Portuguese or other languages at events, then she believes more people might attend.

Danielle explained that she does not understand the new math. She feels that “it’s a longer way” to get to the answer. “It’s longer and harder. I think the math is confusing.” More opportunities for parents to learn how to help their children would be helpful.

Danielle believes it would be more beneficial for the school to have students complete an interest inventory and teach accordingly. Testing students all the time, though she knows it is mandatory, creates anxiety for students. “They should be testing the kids for what they would be good in an area.” Because of the testing, Danielle believes that you are telling children they can’t do something that they “probably [would] be awesome at.” She believes that the testing restricts the child’s choices and prevents them from going into programs like the tech program (vocational program).

Through the interview, Danielle stated that providing opportunities for community members to have their taxes completed or assistance with this would be beneficial. Also a workshop on how to apply for financial aid and scholarships would be helpful. Both of these measures would help create independence for families.

The creation of an exchange program would help people. For example, if you need to work at 7 o'clock in the morning, then someone could watch your children. Then, after school you could reciprocate and watch theirs.

Fixing the transportation system “would be phenomenal”. The cabs here are not very reliable. When Danielle has called a cab before, no one ever showed up. Since, she was only
going about two miles up the road, she believes they probably did not want to take the job.

Danielle misses the convenience of the transportation system in her previous city. The buses ran every twenty to forty minutes depending on where you were in the city. A more efficient system would help with errands such as the grocery store and getting to the different housing, food stamps and other offices. Sometimes those visits take a whole day because of the inefficiencies in the transportation systems.

**Summary.** Danielle is a mother of three boys in the midst of a divorce from her husband. As a child, Danielle was constantly picked on and her mother would always tell her that she was the “worst of her kids”. Racial boundaries did not exist in Danielle’s mind and she did not understand the rationale from others for their existence. In high school, Danielle tried to overdose on Sudafed, but became sick instead. She dropped out of high school and moved out at age seventeen. Before her class graduated, Danielle earned her GED. She has attempted to go back to college several times, but has not been able to complete her Bachelor’s degree. Today, Danielle has a positive attitude regarding North Elementary School. The only exceptions she has against the school include: Cole is “always being watched”, the principal filed a report with the Department of Children and Families against her, and Cole’s first teacher this past school year “was not able to handle” the number of students in her classroom. Danielle’s mother lives with her, but Danielle implies that it is more for convenience as the boys complain when they are alone with her. Danielle receives multiple financial supports from the state. Transportation is one of Danielle’s greatest challenges. She continues to depend on her estranged husband for transportation, though he verbally abuses her and her children. If she were able to have her own reliable transportation, she would be able to pursue a “big girl” job and be able to complete necessary, yet basic errands, such as grocery shopping.
Michaela

[I’m proud] “That I’m still standing, being the woman that I am, to have what I’ve had in the past growing up. It actually has made me a stronger woman. I feel like I'm walking, but I'm not falling yet on my face, but I'm almost there, kind of. I pick myself back up, just realizing everything in the past. I'm proud that I haven't gotten my kids taken away. I could have gotten my kids taken away as quick as my sister did, but they were in a home, my mom. Again, I wake up every day, it's another day with my kids. If it's going to be the world's going to end, as long as my kids [are with me]... It makes me proud that I can say that.”

Background. Michaela is a thirty-three year old woman originally from a city just south of Boston. She identifies herself as African American, Portuguese, Irish and several other ethnic backgrounds. Since 2004, Michaela has been disabled which prevents her from working. She suffers from anxiety, depression and has been a victim of repeated abuse. The center of Michaela’s life is her children – she will do anything for her children. When she was asked how others would describe her, she said they would call her “Supermom”.

Michaela had her first child at eighteen. She has five children of her own – a fourteen year old son, Andrew, a nine year old daughter, Beth, a six year old son, Chad, a three year old son, Donald, and a nine month old daughter, Elaine. Before having Elaine, Michaela did not want to be homeless and pregnant, so she “tried to get the surgery operation done, and they told me I was eleven weeks pregnant.” However, she was five and a half months pregnant. “I couldn't do that; that's basically killing the child.” She also has an eleven-year-old stepdaughter and two step sons that come on weekends. Elaine has several health problems including some
significant respiratory problems. When she was born, she was in the hospital for twelve days and she continues to have regular hospital visits. Several of Michaela’s children have different fathers. Michaela has a total of nine siblings. On her mother’s side, she has one sister, one brother and one deceased brother. Michaela’s mother told her that her brother died of congenital heart disease. On her father’s side, she has three brothers and three sisters. The children on her father’s side have different mothers.

Growing up, Michaela was raped and abused by her uncle. She was always around alcohol. Michaela said her mother was a nurse, but never went to college. Her mother had ADHD and learning disabilities as well. Michaela was never really with her mother, but would spend a lot of time with her friend and her friend’s mother. Michaela reported that her mother was a drinker who was always partying on the weekends. There was always violence growing up. Michaela’s mother was “abused by the guys that she was with. It was an episode, every day….I can't remember one good thing in my childhood. That's bad to say.”

**School experiences.** In school, Michaela had a “whole bunch of friends” and did not experience too many bullying problems. One girl in high school called her a “nigger” all the time, but Michaela said that same girl dated a black guy. Michaela’s sister was very popular and the girl was actually a friend of her sister. Academically, Michaela said she had comprehension problems. Michaela was in many different schools growing up. In high school, her classroom was in the basement “romper room” because of her disability. In eleventh grade, Michaela became pregnant, tried the pregnant mother’s program, but ended up becoming homeless. After becoming homeless, pregnant and being abused, she left school. She never finished her education, though she did try to study at home to complete her GED (General Education Diploma).
**Homelessness.** Michaela has bounced around a lot – she mentioned at least eleven different towns/cities, most of which are in Massachusetts where she has lived. When Michaela became pregnant at eighteen, she went to a teen mother program and then moved to two different cities north of Boston. In 2006, she moved to Florida after she became pregnant with Beth. Beth’s father was from Florida and his mother still lived there. Michaela lived in Florida for seven years on a farm until the “control, violence and abuse were too much to handle”. In addition while she was living in Florida, Beth’s father cheated on Michaela with her best friend who ended up having a baby. Michaela returned to Massachusetts.

Upon returning from Florida, Michaela lived with her sister and mother for a period of time north of Boston. While living there, Michaela’s sister lost custody of her son and the Department of Children and Families placed him with Michaela and later with an aunt. Her sister ended up in a program and regained custody of her son. However, she is again drug involved and selling her pills and her son’s Adderall. Michaela moved out of that home and her sister sold everything. “My kids' stuff she had posted on Facebook, she had signs out, ‘Inside Yard Sale.’ They were buying my TVs; they were buying my kids’ Christmas stuff. We left there with nothing.” Michaela said that her sister mentally abused her. Beth is petrified of her.

Before moving to her current residence, Michaela lived with her current husband’s mother in an adjacent town. However, it was an over fifty-five trailer park where they were not supposed to be living. Michaela said that if she knew in advance how bad her current neighborhood is, she would have stayed where she was. However, she said, “[I am] just trying to get situated, coming from [one town to another town] to here. I just want to be able to be stable.”
Michaela had a job at the Laundromat before Christmas for three weeks. She wanted to save for presents because she did not have any money. Because of where she lived, the boss let her go. If she moved, then the boss said she would hire her back.

**Current interactions with school.** Michaela’s son, Chad, is on an Individualized Education Plan because of speech. Michaela has never missed a meeting.

In order to be involved with the school, Michaela calls the school regularly. If the children have projects then she will help them at home. “I wish I could participate more in the school. Not saying like I have to but just knowing that ... Like my kids, it means a lot to my kids when I go to the awards thing.”

Bullying has been a major concern for Michaela. When she and her children lived in another town, Andrew was jumped when he was on the bus. Beth has been experiencing bullying at North Elementary School. Michaela is considering sending her to another school. Michaela says that the child targeting her daughter lives in the same neighborhood. Beth has come home with scratches and reports that the girl is constantly making comments to her. Beth stated that the other girl came at her with a hockey stick. The school did move the other girl’s classroom, but issues have now spilled into the neighborhood. Michaela feels that the school needs to do more to protect her daughter.

**School support.** The school conducts movie nights for the families, but it is difficult to get there because Michaela’s family has to walk. At Easter, the school conducted an Easter Egg hunt for all of the children.

The school psychologist is great. At Thanksgiving, she passed out turkeys. She also coordinated the payment of Michaela’s rent one month. The school psychologist also conducted a dance program that Beth participated in after school.
Michaela’s children eat breakfast at school in the mornings. North Elementary School regularly asks for volunteers, but because Michaela has to take care of Elaine, she cannot volunteer in the school. She is more than willing to bake cookies for a bake sale. Once a month, the school conducts an afterschool library where the students can take home a book.

Michaela’s son Donald attends Head Start. They would allow her to ride the bus daily to go to school with Donald but because of the baby she cannot do so.

**Challenges and dealing with those challenges.** The health of Elaine has been a source of tremendous stress. Elaine has frequent medical appointments in Boston, which is an hour away. This time away from home occasionally prevents Michaela from commitments to her other children.

Michaela discussed her own anxiety and depression. She sees both a psychiatrist and counselor to talk through her concerns and her anxiety. Because of his work schedule, Michaela feels that talking to her husband is not always possible. “He comes home from work very tired as he works hard.” Michaela describes herself as a “concerned mom” who “if I could be there with them [at school] I would. Like if they're not with me they're at school”.

Not having a car is a huge source of stress. The rain and the snow really made it difficult to get to school in the winter, as the sidewalks were not always cleared. Michaela’s daughter Beth’s drawing was displayed in an art show downtown, which is about a ten-minute drive by car. Only two students were picked from her class. It was raining all that day and they did not go because of a lack of transportation.

There are many issues in their current neighborhood – drugs, violence and bullying are the three Michaela highlighted throughout our time together. She explained that the other day someone sold someone she knows what was claimed to be Xanax, but it was heart pressure pills.
Beth found a needle near the pond. Michaela is concerned that “People are going to seriously kill people. They don't care. They do not care.” Her neighbor’s friend was jumped by a group of people because of a relationship issue. Because of the issues in the neighborhood, Michaela keeps her children in the house or only allows them in the backyard. She said that she should not be made to feel like that in her own neighborhood.

Michaela has three locks on her door. There is a special knock that she has with her children in case Michaela does not bring her key when she goes out in the yard. She is “way too scared”. The people on the first floor were robbed at gunpoint. The young men living on the third floor regularly use drugs. The two young men are not on the lease; one of their mothers is actually leasing the apartment and not living in the apartment. Across the street, there is a man who is involved with the neighborhood watch, but he does not call the police when there is an issue. Michaela thinks he is scared of some of the people. When Michaela first moved into her apartment, Chad asked her for an ice pack because there was a man who had overdosed lying on the pavement of her apartment building’s parking lot. There have been people who have jumped the fence in the backyard while being chased by the police. One of her sons picked up a baggie of white powder that Michaela told him was fabric softener. Glasses containing crack are laying in the area. All of these issues concern Michaela about the safety of her family.

Community support. Though the neighborhood is unsafe, there are some services available to Michaela and her family. For example, Michaela’s son, Andrew, has been going to church. The church leader takes her son to football games and youth group. Andrew absolutely loves church and would go every day if he could.

Many of Elaine’s appointments are in Boston, which requires transportation. She is able to take advantage of the prescription for transportation through Mass Health. Setting up this
transportation is not easy and the doctor needs to authorize the need for it. Michaela explained that transportation must be arranged about a week before.

Michaela reported that her family always shut the door on her. “They weren't the ones to help. It was always the ones who weren't my family who wants to help.” There are a few women in her life who are always there for her. She refers to these women as family. The women will do anything for her even without Michaela asking. During our interview, two of these women came unexpectedly. One woman brought her a coffee and both women changed Elaine’s diaper without being asked. In order to go to appointments and food shopping, Michaela has to go with someone else and work around their time schedule.

**Opportunities for future engagement with the school and community.** Because of the significant challenges Michaela faces each day, she focuses on fundamental community services. Transportation is a daily concern. Michaela said that “they” need to “stop giving out rides to the Methadone clinic”. In place of these rides, there should be a bus to get the children to school. This would make sure that children arrive at school on time and “did not have to walk through the snow”.

**Summary.** Michaela is the mother of eight children comprised of five of her own children and three stepchildren. Michaela had her first child at the age of eighteen. She was disabled in 2004 and suffers from anxiety, depression and has been a victim of repeated abuse. Michaela has been homeless numerous times. She is seeking stability for both her and her children, as they have moved countless times. Michaela hopes that her children complete high school, as she dropped out at seventeen. Interactions with the school are mostly positive, except for a continual bullying issue involving her daughter and a neighborhood girl. Michaela does not feel that the school has done enough to address the issue and now it is overflowing into the
neighborhood. The constant concern for safety, the abundance of drugs in the neighborhood, the lack of transportation, the bullying occurring at school and the lack of money are Michaela’s greatest challenges today.

Mary

The feeling of stepping into the mud, I remember clearly I felt the mud just go in between my toes, and the whole experience ... because the school is a countryside. So the whole experience there, I think, changed me totally to see different things, to see new things.

Background. Mary grew up in Taiwan, where she completed much of her schooling. She has three boys, Aaron age eight, Brad age five and Charlie age two. Their primary language is Chinese, although Mary can read, write and converse in English. At home, Mary communicates with Aaron in both English and Chinese, but communicates with the younger two in Chinese. Her youngest two are able to say basic English words such as Hi and Bye. Mary returned to the United States nine months ago to have her three sons learn English. She is currently living with her aunt and uncle. Mary has her green card and became a citizen of the United States when she earned her Master’s degree in Los Angeles.

Mary’s family was “not very focused on the academic part of school. So I didn’t suffer a lot.” The norm is Taiwan is that parents expect their children to excel academically. “Some of the kids are really being pushed, put on a lot of pressure to get good grades.”

Educational system in Taiwan. The educational system in Taiwan was set up first grade to sixth grade as elementary, three years junior high and then three years senior high. When Mary was a student, the government only paid for education until the ninth grade. After ninth grade, students were required to take a test, similar to the SAT. Students have to apply to senior high schools and their acceptance is totally based on the score. Grades in school do not count, so
everyone’s priority is that one test. “If you don't get to where you wanted to go to, you need to do it all over again.” If students do not receive a good score on the test, they must wait a year until it is offered again. A student can retake the test year after year if they choose. Many students go to a cram school to study, which is not paid for by the government. The better high schools that students want to attend are government funded. Students with good scores on that one test go to these schools. Otherwise, parents need to pay a lot of money to get their children through high school. The students that are in the government-funded high schools have a better chance to get into government-funded universities, which is also cheaper. After students finish the twelfth grade, they need to take another comprehensive test to go to the university:

We are not used to [getting] a loan and then pay that back after you start working. So some people just stop school after high school. They just go to work because their parents don't have the money to send them to university because it's really expensive.

Only a small percentage of students qualify for these government-funded educations.

**School experiences.** When Mary was in school, the schools focused greatly on the academic components. If students did not get good grades, the students would be physically disciplined. They would receive one slap on their palm, leg or wherever for every point that they lost on the test. The teacher would set the benchmark that the students would need to reach. "Everyone in the class needs to get to eighty points or above.” Mary remembers having a test one day. The next day, the teacher would stand at the front of the classroom with a stick in his/her hand, say, "Okay," and the students formed a line. Mary said:

Punishing students in that way does not help the kids to learn. It helps the kids to learn the way to put their palm so you don't feel that much pain or rub pepper [to] numb your
hands so you don't feel [pain] ... or you just get used to that... So it's not a way to help anyone to study. It helps people to cheat more.

Mary does not remember having too much pressure from her mother when she was in elementary school. A lot of kids would go to after-school school, called cram school or tutoring where they would just repeat a concept over and over again. Students would retake tests many times. Mary and her sister did not have to attend these because her mom did not believe it was necessary. After taking tests, Mary’s mother would look at her scores and say, "Oh, you didn't do very well on this thing. Did you study? Did you really try hard to do that?" If the scores were really bad, she would say something like, “Okay, try hard next time?” Because the pressure in her home to succeed academically was not like many other students, Mary thinks she had a happier childhood.

In junior high school, Mary went to boarding school. She lived there from Monday to Friday and went home on Saturday. When Mary graduated from junior high, she attended a school for five years. The school covered three years of high school and then two years of college. It is similar to vocational school. At its completion, Mary had earned an Associate's degree. During her five years, Mary chose to major in horticulture. Starting from the very first year, she would go to the farm three times a week to grow different plants including, flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Since she completed the program, it has changed because “more parents want their kids to get their Bachelor's rather than Associate's, so less and less people go through that type of school. So it's dying out.” Mary explained that many people would say that students from those trainings are easier to work with. These students have more hands-on practice rather than the straight book knowledge that students receive at a typical university.
After Mary graduated from the Associate Degree program, she came to the United States where she studied and eventually earned a masters degree while living in California. She worked for a while and then she moved back to Taiwan.

**Proudest moment.** When I asked Mary what her proudest moment of her life was, she recalled a time when she attended the combination high school/college. On the first day, she went to the farm. The teacher told them to take off their socks and shoes. Mary recounts:

The feeling of stepping into the mud, I remember clearly I felt the mud just go in between my toes, and the whole experience ... because the school is a countryside. So the whole experience there, I think, changed me totally to see different things, to see new things.

Mary could not recall or think of any experience when she was in Taiwan that she felt really positive. “I don't like it, and most of the time I remember is the time that I'm with my friends and I forget most of the things that I learned from school.”

**Most memorable negative moment.** In elementary school, Mary had a veteran history teacher of whom she was very afraid. He insisted that when he came into the classroom, everybody needed to sit up straight with their hands by their side, no movement, no talking and each desk was to be very clean with only a textbook on it:

Sometimes it was really hard because in Taiwan, even though we have summer vacation, but before summer vacation or right after summer vacation it's very, very hot and there's no air conditioning in the classroom. Everybody has this thing made of hard plastic to put under what they are writing. One student was using that to fan himself, and the teacher just grabbed the fan and hit him on the head with it and he was bleeding. Every time the teacher came to her classroom to teach, Mary was very, very nervous.
He would walk in and some kids would put their water bottle on their desk. And it's fine with all the other teachers. We were all sitting there. Nobody moved, and he just threw all the water bottles out of the window.

Their classroom was on the third or fourth floor.

**Work experience.** The working culture in Taiwan is very different. Everyone had to work overtime. If the boss did not leave the office, you could not leave work before your boss did even if your work was completed for the day. One of her friends said, "You know, I'm an expert of acting busy. You need to learn from me and you will work just fine. Every boss will like you because you always act like you're busy doing something, but actually you're not." One time Mary started packing up when all of her work was completed. The boss asked where she was going. She responded that she was done and was going home. The boss then told her to help the other people who were not done.

Mary’s ex-husband wanted to open a cram school. Cram schools are companies that assist students to review concepts over and over again in order to pass required exams to further education. Before doing so, Mary wanted to become more comfortable teaching English, so she attended a training school to do so. The training lasted only a few weeks and graduates left with a certificate allowing them to teach English.

I still think it's not very well regulated because in all the cram schools you don't need any license about teaching anything as long as the student would sit in the classroom with you, you can just go teach. So I've been teaching preschool kids all the way through high school.

Mary received one job without the company even verifying any experience on her resume. She was able to read a magazine that the receptionist handed her, so she was hired.
Why Mary moved to the United States. Mary moved back to the United States because she wanted her boys to learn English. She knows it is easier to learn a language when you are young. Mary asked her mother to talk to her aunt and uncle about moving in with them. Because Mary’s cousins moved out shortly before her mother asked, they had room permitting the move to occur.

Mary’s children’s educational experience. In Taiwan, Mary believes that the education system teaches students to learn in a way that instills an idea of perfection. “You tell me how to do it and I'll make it perfect.” As a result, it is hard for students or people that train in the Taiwanese system to think of new things, be creative and discover things on their own. Mary sees the difference in the education system here. Aaron will learn something and Mary thinks it is really simple. “He's in second grade and still doing adding and the numbers are really not very big, but I think the system is trying to teach them to find the rules or things by doing these simple things.” In Taiwan, the teacher just teaches you, "Okay. This is how to do it," and then, "Let's practice." In the United States, students are taught to be independent learners. An example Mary used to make her point is how the calendar is taught in the United States. Every day they have a calendar time. "Oh, do you know what month it is?" and they sing a little song about that and then they teach students about calendars. “So I think kids learn from the calendar day by day and then they finally get to a point where, ‘Oh, there are 30 or 31 days in a month, and there are 12 months in a year.’” When Aaron was in first grade in Taiwan, the teacher would bring out the system and tell them, "Okay, a year has 12 months, and there's Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and da, da, da, and this is the format of a calendar. Now I'm telling you how to use this,” and they were given a lot of exercises to practice. “It's like I tell you the thing you need to know and you need to practice to do a lot of things to use the rules that I tell you.” In the United States,
Mary explained that students can gather different information and then come up with a conclusion. In the Taiwanese system, it's like, "I give you the conclusion. You don't need to think about it. You just use this, apply this conclusion to all the questions that's there."

Mary thought that she was going to be in the United States for six months, but she now believes it was an unrealistic plan. She hoped that her children would learn to speak English by then. After nine months here, she thinks that they will be here at least another year. However, it will also depend on how much Aaron likes it here. In Taiwan, it was “really painful for him and for me” because he always had work to complete. While his friends were at recess, he would need to stay in because he would have to rewrite his work. It was not neat enough or he did not color every part of the paper. In the United States, if there is an area that needs to be white and the paper is white, it is acceptable not to color that area, but not so in Taiwan. Aaron did not like to draw because in Taiwan the teacher would say that a house should be a specific way. Now he likes to draw. “I think that says a lot about the environment.” Mary is happy to see them be free to do what they want, but at the same time, she wants to go back in order for them to learn to read and write Chinese. Chinese is really hard and there are thousands of characters that need to be learned.

**Current interactions with school.**

*Positive.* When Mary and her children first arrived, she needed to register Aaron for school. The immunization records were in Chinese, so she needed to go to the doctor to translate the records into English. The response that Mary regularly gets from the school, "Oh, don't worry.” Mary was worried because they arrived on September 2nd and school already started. When she said that they were staying with her uncle and not paying rent, they quickly made copies of all the required documentation needed. Mary feels that people are always helping at
school. After the first day of school, Aaron said, "I had a great day. It was so much fun. I want to come back tomorrow."

North Elementary School provided Aaron with a “very real welcoming”. During the school year, the teachers taught all the kids to say "Hello," in different languages. It seems as though someone is saying, "Hello" in Chinese to him everyday.

Mary believes that home/school communication is very good. “I think the school gives us a lot of information because every new chapter [in math] the teacher will send home some materials about the thing they are going to do.” She goes on to say, that the teacher provides information about websites that parents can access or that students can practice needed skills. “I think academically I think we do have enough.”

**Cultural differences.** In Taiwan, many people wear a mask to prevent spreading illnesses or to filter the pollution in the air. “Here you cannot do it.” Aaron has asthma like symptoms and when they first arrived, he would wear a mask regularly. The belief in Chinese medicine is that the cold air comes into the lungs and causes the lungs to close up. The air is warmer when you breathe through the mask preventing the lungs from closing up. In addition, Mary sometimes would put some essential oil in Aaron’s mask. When he breathes, the essential oil soothes him. When Aaron arrived at school, the school nurse asked, "What's happening? What happened to him?" The school nurse explained that in the United States, one only puts on a mask if you are very sick and you are preventing the spread of a virus. The mask helped Aaron be comfortable, but the school said he could not wear it. Mary stated that is “not too hard to go along with”.
On one occasion, Head Start called Mary and said Charlie was wearing pajamas to school. She did not see his clothes as pajamas. She does believe that Head Start is trying to educate families on how to fit more properly into society.

**Learning English.** When Mary was in boarding school, she learned to speak English. The majority of the lessons were taught in English. Mary would have to repeat the lessons in English back to her teacher. When she mispronounced words, the teacher would correct her pronunciation. In traditional schools in Taiwan, most students can read and write English well, but they do not spend the time practicing speaking English. After earning her Master’s degree in the United States, Mary returned to Taiwan and taught English classes.

When Mary returned to the United States last year, her children spoke mostly Chinese. Mary’s oldest son, Aaron is progressing very well. When Aaron was younger and she read him a book in Chinese, he would listen to the story. If Mary read the book in English, he would just crawl away. When he grew a little bit older, Mary formed a class with her neighbors where she would teach English very slowly. Each meeting would focus on four or five words within a specific category, such as fruit. When Aaron first started school in the United States, he would often say, “I don’t know. Just read it to me” when he was working on homework. Now he is able to complete his homework with minimal help to read the directions/story.

Mary’s youngest two children were attending Head Start and they were not learning English. There seemed to be a lot of behavioral problems in the classroom, so there was not an academic focus. At the time of the interview, the boys had switched to another preschool program and within the first week, they came home and said two new words. The new preschool is more academically focused. Mary thinks that they will begin to learn English faster at the new preschool and hopes they will be able to communicate with their friends more.
**Challenges and dealing with those challenges.** Mary and her sons are living with her aunt and uncle. Though she is extremely appreciative and they are very welcoming, there are still conflicts. “It’s like two families joined together. It’s hard.” There are different parenting styles. Mary and her three sons sleep in the same room on the same bed like they did in Taiwan. She thinks it will be hard to move to a new place and create separate sleeping arrangements. She thinks it is better for them to do that right now. Mary is thinking of buying a bunk bed so the older two can sleep in their own bed in the same room. In Taiwan, Mary had a king size bed with another single bed connected to the king size bed, so it was not too crowded. Right now it is really crowded because they have a queen bed. When it was cold in the winter, they were able to stay warm. Mary said, “If you read about teaching parenting, they always say you put your kids in a separate bed and then I asked my students [in Taiwan] and I found out about half of my students who are more than ten years old are still sleeping with their parents.” In Taiwan, boys will sleep with their dad and the girls will sleep with their mom even at eleven or twelve. “It's more normal in Taiwan than it is here.”

Not having a lot of friends is difficult because there is not anyone to talk with when you “have that mood” to talk to someone. Mary does not want to talk to her mother or her sister in Taiwan because they are so far away and she does not want to worry them. There are four other mothers that she has met on the playground that have become good friends.

Since Chinese is Mary’s primary language, it is difficult to understand people sometimes. When people use advanced words, talk too fast, talk about cultural topics or use slang, Mary has a difficult time comprehending the conversation. Mary explained that if it is related to her children, she will ask for a topic to be clarified. If she is talking to the women at the playground, she will sometimes ask and sometimes she will not ask. When Aaron is doing homework, he
will ask questions that she does not understand. She said, “I was not in the classroom. I do not know anything about it. I could look it up from the internet, but I think he is old enough to and he is capable of doing it.”

Mary would like to have her boys become citizens of the United States. There is a lot of paperwork to complete the process. She does not want the embassy to report that she has her children here. When Mary called a lawyer, he quoted that it would cost $2,500 per child to complete the paperwork. It is a lot of money, so Mary plans on doing the work herself.

**Community support.** In Taiwan, Mary never had a social worker to help her with paperwork and find available resources. However, in Massachusetts, the social worker helps Mary with these tasks. The Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) has worked with Mary to get the necessary resources. Mary qualified for food stamps, cash benefits and a child care voucher through DTA. Housing is another resource available, but Mary did not apply because she is living with relatives. She did visit the housing office. She explained that they were one of the least friendly offices because they handed her the papers, told her that she needed to mail in the forms and they would not meet with people. She could see that this could be difficult to complete the housing forms, especially for people who do not understand English.

Because Mary was receiving the cash benefit from DTA, she was required to have a paying job, volunteer, or go to school. Mary chose to volunteer. “I wanted to be in the school to kind of see if my kids sometimes need my help or not.” Mary volunteers at school and in her church. She used to volunteer at Head Start when her boys attended. She volunteered at the book fair at North Elementary School. Because the PTA meetings are at night, Mary did not join the Parent and Teacher Association. Mary also volunteers at her church where she works in the food pantry and teaches Sunday school.
When she was unhappy at Head Start, the manager at the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) office told Mary what other schools would take vouchers. The manager described another school that was closer to their house but does not offer bus transportation.

Before making the switch, Mary asked the opinion of school psychologist whose children also go to the new preschool.

Mary is not hesitant to ask others for help or about how to get aid. She is very complimentary of the people in Massachusetts. Within the past year, a health clinic opened near the school. Mary went to the health clinic and they helped her apply for medical insurance with Mass Health. “It’s not that they just say, Oh, this is the form and you can do it.” There are individuals that fill out the forms for people that come in seeking assistance. Mary told me that because she is not always sure how to respond to some of the questions, it has been very helpful to have individuals assisting in completing the forms. In addition, there are dentists, doctors and a lab to draw blood at the health clinic.

During the upcoming summer, Mary has several activities planned for Aaron. In order to maintain his current level of English, he is going to attend the Title One summer program. The focus of the program is reading and writing. In addition, Aaron is going to attend an overnight Salvation Army summer camp. The Salvation Army will transport him to the weeklong camp where food, activities and sleeping accommodations will be provided. Mary only needed to pay forty dollars for the whole week.

**Opportunities for future engagement with the school and community.** When Mary’s children went to Head Start, they had family events in both the day and the evening. One event was a buddy night where the children would use a banana box to build a car. These events provided parents an opportunity to interact with each other. When they went to Head Start for
activities, it was for fun things to do with your children and their friends. Activities such as these would be very beneficial at North Elementary School. “I think that will help especially for people like us to get to know more people because we're related because of our kids and you find some help sometimes.” In September, Brad will be going to kindergarten, but it is only for half a day. The other half day he will be in his current preschool/daycare. One of the mothers said she could transport Brad from one school to the other. There needs to be more opportunities for parents to get to know each other.

Mary volunteered at North Elementary School. In the winter, she would see some of the student’s jackets and their clothes, as being “very, very dirty and smelly”. She talked to the teacher and suggested that the schools have a washer and a drier. Mary thinks, “maybe the kids wearing the jacket the whole winter and nobody has the time to wash”. She noted that some of the children’s jackets smelled like secondhand smoke, which then permeates the other students’ jackets as well.

Creating a list of nannies in the neighborhood who are available to take care of children around the school would be a very beneficial resource. “I know the school are allowed or not to do that because it's kind of advertising. It's a fine line.” Mary understands that the school could not endorse any of the day care providers, but if there was a list she could ask other parents for recommendations.

Mary’s future. Mary believes that her uncle wants to retire and move back to Taiwan. Therefore, Mary is unsure what the future will bring. Her goal is to get a place of her own but it is really expensive. If Mary gets a job that she really likes, she might stay in the United States. She knows that there are ways for families with lower income to get housing.
Summary. Mary grew up in Taiwan and is the divorced mother of three boys. When she was in college, she attended school in California and became a citizen of the United States. Approximately nine months ago, she returned to the United States, this time with her boys, to allow her boys to learn to read, write and speak English. She is currently doubled up with her aunt and uncle, which is a great challenge for Mary. Education is of great value to Mary. Even though the education is not as rigorous as in Taiwan, she sees that Aaron is happier and enjoying tasks, such as drawing. He did not enjoy drawing in Taiwan because it was extremely rigid. North Elementary School has been very welcoming of Mary and her boys. In addition to her living situation, cultural differences, understanding some conversations and completing forms, having to create a group of friends to talk to, and the costs of some items are Mary’s greatest challenges today. Mary does receive financial support from the state and has found numerous resources to obtain these supports. Mary is unsure when or if she will return to Taiwan, it depends on how much Aaron likes the United States and how quickly the boys learn English.

Focus Group

An email was sent to six people on two separate occasions to invite them to participate in a focus group. A focus group was explained to be a “meeting where we will discuss your own experiences in school, your current interactions with the school and in the community, current challenges, and ideas you have for future supports that could be helpful.” In the first email, times were offered right after school started for the day or right before school ended for the day to prevent issues with child care. Two responses were received both saying that during the day did not work due to work schedules. Another time was scheduled for the evening and one response was received. Light refreshments were served for all attendees. One person arrived to
participate in the focus group. Because she was interested in sharing her story, an individual interview was conducted.

Jill and her husband purchased their home in the North Elementary School community shortly after they married nine years ago. Her husband is from north of Boston, which is where Jill attended college. Jill’s family is from Cape Cod so their current residence is convenient for childcare. Jill and her husband have two girls, an eight-year-old daughter and a six-year-old daughter, both of whom attend North Elementary School. Jill’s husband has a fifteen-year-old daughter who lives with them on weekends.

**Current interactions with school.**

*Positive.* Jill thinks that North Elementary School has been great. I love that it's a small school. I love that it's a neighborhood school. I think the difficult part is the no buses. I'll be the first to say it would be wonderful to be able to say to my neighbor ‘Can you walk the kids down to the bus this morning?’

Jill has taken advantage of the Y program after school because of her work schedule. Because one of her daughters was in half-day kindergarten, she needed to find outside daycare. The YMCA program does not work with half-day kindergarten.

The teachers are so caring and interested in the students. She goes on to say that the class sizes are reasonable. However when the principal reports the class sizes at monthly School Council meetings they range from one meeting to the next. “How many kids come and go? I think that's a big piece too. There's a lot of in and out, but they [the school] seem to handle it well and kind of maneuver things around as they need to.” There is not a lot of space in the school and the school moves classrooms to accommodate growth, but “they really do a pretty flawless job” with having little space and still making everything work.
A benefit that Jill sees to having a smaller school is the “close relationships.” If one wants a parent teacher conference, it is easy to get. The teachers are very accommodating and will email back and forth. “I got an email when my daughter's teacher forgot to make her birthday crown saying, ‘Oh my God, I'm so sorry. Please tell her I'll give her extra stickers on Monday.’” Jill said that it had been field day and there was a lot going on. Some mornings, Jill will call the secretary and the secretary knows Jill and her children. The principal will even go check to see if her daughter brought her lunch. “It's kind of like an all hands on deck approach.” The attention that the staff gives and provides to the students individually is harder to find at a larger school.

**Community challenges.** Daycare options are very limited in the area. Because of half-day kindergarten, Jill needed a daycare that would provide transportation to and from school. She needed to continue to work and could not leave work at 11:15 a.m. or plan meetings around pick up every day. Jill examined the state list of daycare providers and really had no choice because there was only one available that would provide transportation. Many of the daycare providers she did call said, "If there's a bus stop at the end of the road that's fine. We'll get her at the bus stop, but we don't go back and forth to the school for pickup and drop-off." North Elementary School does not provide bus transportation so this was not an option. “For a while it really upset me that I felt like I had no other choice.” At one point, Jill was having a difficult time with her day care. The day care provider was having a lot of family issues, including a divorce, her teenage daughter was pregnant, and another daughter had just moved in with her girlfriend. “It was a lot going on that I just didn't feel that the kids should be exposed to.”

**Community interactions.** “I live dead center, where we bought our house so I'm in the middle of the madness.” Both Jill and her husband work full time. The ice cream truck came
into the neighborhood and her husband bought ice cream for their children. There is a woman who lives across the street who has six children. Her children “kind of float around and shoes are optional”. The woman next door has four children under the age of eight. While Jill’s children were picking out their ice creams, one of the women said, "Oh, I don't buy ice cream off the ice cream truck. That's too expensive. Why would you buy that?” Jill explained that the woman is often sitting on her porch smoking cigarettes.

Jill’s husband is very forthcoming with everybody in the neighborhood. The kids that are causing trouble are the ones that were mowing Jill and her husband’s lawn when they first moved in nine years ago. The same children were so respectful when they were younger, always saying hello and giving her compliments. She sees many of the teenagers now floating around and getting into trouble.

It's one of those can't beat them join them things. I'm like, you sit on your porch and smoke cigarettes and do nothing with your kids because that's what everybody around you is doing and that's the easy way out.

Jill said that her neighbor complains all the time, "I can't work. I can't work." Jill’s response, “Well, stop getting pregnant.” Recently, one of the neighborhood kids was shot. Jill’s husband asked the young man who was shot, "What are you doing? What are you doing getting shot? You have a nine-month-old baby now. Are you trying to get yourself killed? Why are you getting involved in this stuff?" He said, "Oh, I know. I'm getting out. I can't do this anymore. I shouldn't be doing this." Her husband responded, "Come on. You've got to get yourself together. You're going to end up back in jail. How are you going to provide for your child when you're back in jail? You're not going in the right direction." When this young man was younger, Jill’s husband would often buy him an ice cream from the ice cream truck. Jill and her husband have
developed relationships with the young kids in the neighborhood, however, she explained, “we can't be everybody's parents.”

When I asked Jill about the concern about snitching or saying something against what is going on, she replied that she has never felt concerned. Jill thinks that a lot of the violence, trouble, and drugs has to do with boredom, lack of activities, not being involved. When Jill and her husband first moved in to the neighborhood, the girl next door was fourteen and she was pregnant. Jill helped by bringing her baby clothes. Often, there will be kids that go to Jill’s house and ask if they can borrow a bike or scooter or ask for some fishing line. Around the age of eleven or twelve, the kids seem to stop asking to borrow items.

Kids are starting to use drugs by age fifteen or under because they have been watching their parents do it. Jill and her husband do not question whether there are drugs in the neighborhood; they know there are drugs and see the drug paraphernalia. “People don't hide things. They don't. People advertise that they're doing things. Its kind of one of those things. I'm not assuming that the neighbor does it. I know that they do.”

Many of the apartments are used as shelters. “If people are coming and going, they don't care as much about the neighborhood.” There are a few neighbors who have been living in the neighborhood for thirty plus years, and then the rest just cycle through. Jill’s husband will often pick up trash in the neighborhood and a few other neighbors have started picking up trash as well.

**Opportunities for future engagement with the school and community.** One of the key solutions may be to keep the kids busy. The resources are there. If the children are engaged from the time they are young, through middle and high school years, they will not get into trouble. “These kids are dying for attention.” Jill saw one child playing kick the can by himself
in the street. She said that she is always seeing discounts or tuition free if you are financially eligible, so they would be able to participate in the activities. The Parent Teacher Association can highlight the opportunities available in addition to bringing in different activities that the parents could sign their children up for at a resource night.

As far as ideas with improving education, Jill feels “like that true education piece has been beaten to death. They must breeze through college now because they already know everything that I feel like I learned in college.” She feels that future education should focus on more of a self-awareness and socialization, especially with the increasing use of technology and the lack of socialization that kids participate in daily. One suggestion that she had was to provide full day kindergarten for all students, as it would be very beneficial academically and for working parents’ schedules.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to understand the challenges that primary caregivers of North Elementary School students face in order to effectively communicate and support both students and families. In addition, the purpose is to develop possibilities for building a reciprocal relationship between home and school to improve the academic success of all students. Three parents from North Elementary School were interviewed three times in a one-on-one setting in a location of the participant’s choosing. In addition, one parent from North Elementary School attended the planned focus group. All of the narrative stories of the participants reveal that North Elementary School has created positive relationships, which is supported because of the size of the school. Academically, there were no concerns identified. One participant stated, the “education piece has been beaten to death.” Three of the four participants identified significant concerns with drugs in the neighborhood and two participants highlighted concerns of violence
in the neighborhood. Community resources are accessed by all of the participants interviewed one-on-one. Two of the three participants noted that accessing the supports is difficult without additional support. One explained that she believes the system encourages people to remain dependent on the system.

The next chapter includes a discussion of these findings as well as results and implications of the results. Results are presented along with the theoretical framework and the literature supporting this topic.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the challenges that primary caregivers of North Elementary School students face in order to effectively communicate and support both students and families. In addition, the purpose is to develop possibilities for building a reciprocal relationship between home and school to improve the academic success of all students. This study addressed the following research questions: 1) What are the lived experiences of primary caregivers of North Elementary School as they reflect on their own educational journey? 2) What are the lived experiences of primary caregivers as they currently engage with North Elementary School about their children? 3) In what ways can primary caregivers see opportunities for future engagement with North Elementary School?

In this chapter, the major themes that presented themselves in the narrative interviews will be presented along with connections to the theoretical framework and literature that supports this study.

Research Design Review

Creswell (2007) defines qualitative research “as a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). A Call for Participants in both English and Portuguese was sent home with every student at North Elementary School. Eleven completed Call for Participants were returned. Three individuals were chosen from the respondents according to the criteria set out in purposeful sampling. A fourth individual needed to be selected after one of the initial three did not show up for two prearranged interviews and then stopped responding to emails. The interviewed participants shared their stories in response to open ended questions posed regarding the person’s background, current interactions with school, current daily struggles, current supports being
received, and ideas that would increase participation at the school and in the community.
Additional questions were asked as prompts to have participants elaborate on their answers if needed. Each person participated in three interviews. After each interview, the transcripts were reviewed for areas that needed additional clarification. Clarifying questions were developed and asked at the subsequent interviews. After conducting one-on-one interviews, an email was sent to the remaining seven respondents to invite them to participate in the focus group. Multiple dates and times were offered. One person attended. Open-ended questions were asked about her general background and current interactions with the school and community. Further, she was asked her opinion on how the school could increase parental participation and/or ideas for reaching out to the community at large.

Limitations

Throughout this research, the researcher attempted to understand the lived experiences of the participants from their point of view (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). The participants shared their stories so that their daily struggles and experiences were understood and their perspectives were valued. With some questions, participants seemed unwilling to elaborate on their initial responses. During the interviews, follow up questions were asked of the participants; however, additional details were not always obtained. This led to additional questions when analyzing the transcripts. Readers of the research may also develop questions, which remain unanswered. Because some answers were brief and general, information that would provide a clearer understanding of a participant’s life may be missing. The participants in the research were all very positive about North Elementary School; however, their actual level of participation at North Elementary School is unclear. One might also question if this positive view of school is inclusive of all community members or just those who were interviewed. Emails were sent to
the seven potential participants in the focus group yet only one chose to participate. Do the other six potential participants not have a positive view of North Elementary School? Because there were only four participants in this study, one needs to question whether they are representative of the entire school community. It is also important to note that although there may be a positive view of North Elementary School, positive attitude does not necessarily correspond to active participation at events and presence in the school building.

**Participation**

The initial interviews were scheduled with the three individuals through a phone call. Each of the participants expressed interest in participating in the study. Danielle expressed that we could write a biography about her life. Michaela stated that she wanted to tell her story. Mary explained that she is interested in higher-level studies. Mary was selected after repeated attempts were made to interview another individual.

All of Danielle’s interviews were held at North Elementary School. Danielle arrived early for each interview. Subsequent interviews were scheduled at the conclusion of each interview.

Michaela’s first interview was held at North Elementary School and subsequent interviews were held at Michaela’s house. At the first interview, a date and time were scheduled for the second interview. Michaela told me to call her when I arrived because a key is needed to open the door. When I arrived and called, she did not answer the phone. A second call yielded the same lack of response. Michaela called me back after a few minutes and stated that she completely forgot our appointment. We scheduled another time at her house. The next time, I again called as had been arranged. Michaela was in a medical cab heading to Boston with her youngest child. She had again forgot. The following day when I called to schedule the time, I
told Michaela that I would call the day before to confirm. The second and third interview went on as scheduled.

Mary and I met at Dunkin Donuts for the first interview. This was a location she chose. At the end of our first interview, Mary tried to schedule the second interview at the job training office where she went regularly. I called to confirm the meeting, but the location of the meeting was changed to North Elementary School. The final interview was scheduled at Dunkin Donuts. When she had not arrived after fifteen minutes, I called her. She had forgotten. However, she said she could be there in fifteen minutes so I waited and the interview was conducted.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

Background. Participants in the study presented with backgrounds that consisted of multiple moves, homelessness, some drug involvement, and having multiple adults in their lives. Two of the three participants have siblings from different mothers or fathers. One of the participants never mentioned her father. It is unknown if her father was involved in any part of her childhood. Two of the three participants have children with more than one man and both of those participants were teenage mothers. All three of the participants have been divorced or are currently in the process of being divorced. Evans (2004) states that students who are poor are more likely to live in a family where divorce has occurred.

During Jill’s one-on-one interview, she stated that her fourteen-year-old neighbor was pregnant when she moved into the neighborhood nine years ago. Jill continues to see pregnant teenagers and unwed women in the neighborhood. Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) state that poor families are more likely to be headed by a parent, who is single, has low educational attainment, is unemployed, has low earning potential, and is young. In addition, they state that
the rate of out-of-wedlock births among poor teens is almost three times as high as the rate among those from families who are not poor.

Although one of the participants did not directly state it, special needs of their children were discussed by all of the participants. Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) discovered that children living below the poverty threshold are 1.3 times as likely as children who are not poor to experience learning disabilities and developmental delays. Of her three children, Danielle has one son who is on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for occupational therapy and another son who currently takes medication for ADHD and has behavioral issues. Some of Danielle’s statements lead me to believe that this child is also on an IEP, but I cannot confirm this. Of Michaela’s six children, two are on an IEP for speech. Additionally, she has a son who takes medication for ADHD. Michaela herself has ADHD, anxiety, and depression. She takes medication for these issues. Mary does not have any children with an IEP. However, she discussed how her oldest son had difficulty in school in Taiwan. In Taiwan, he would have to redo his work multiple times. Currently, he continues to struggle with homework.

According to Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997), poor children suffer higher incidences of adverse health, developmental, and other outcomes than non-poor children. Low birth weight, physical health, and cognitive and emotional problems can persist through childhood and adolescence. Michaela spoke about the health issues that her youngest daughter has experienced since birth. One of Mary’s sons suffers from asthma like symptoms.

Patton and Johnson (2009) found that adolescents, males, members of non-dominant race or ethnicity groups, and low-income individuals have a higher probability of being exposed to violence. Michaela has been abused and raped multiple times. When Michaela was a teenager, her uncle raped her. As a child, she witnessed her mother being beaten by multiple men.
Michaela was abused for four years by the father of her oldest son even while pregnant. Later when she lived in Florida, she was abused by her often-violent boyfriend, which led to her return to Massachusetts.

**Educational Journey**

**Homelessness.** All three of the participants have been homeless at one point as defined by the McKinney Vento Act (1987). Two of the three participants were homeless beginning at approximately age seventeen. Michaela and Danielle both spent a great deal of time staying at a friend’s house rather than their own. This supports Jensen’s (2009) belief that poor children have fewer support networks and adolescents are more likely to rely on peers rather than adults. In addition, Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Chen, Rouse and Culhane (2012) state that children with a homeless experience have lower reading scores and experience more problems in task and social engagement in school. Danielle lived in a motel for a while. Michaela has been homeless multiple times. Mary is technically homeless because she is living with her aunt and uncle. Jill stated that several of the homes/apartments located in her neighborhood are used for shelters.

**Drugs, alcohol and violence.** Drugs, alcohol and violence have influenced the lives of most of the participants. Growing up, Danielle’s father was both an alcoholic and drug addict. As a teenager, Danielle smoked “pot”. At the age of eighteen, Danielle tried to overdose on Sudafed. Also at the age of eighteen, Danielle was arrested on charges of possession of a Class D substance. Two years ago, Danielle’s cousin, with whom she was close, died of a heroin overdose. Michaela reported that she is not an addict or a drinker. However, her sister sells and uses drugs. As a result, Michaela’s sister had to attend a program and lost custody of her son to the Department of Children and Families. Evans (2004) states that students who are poor are more likely to spend time in foster or other care. Her sister has regained custody of her son, but
continues to use drugs. Michaela and Jill reported that there is a significant amount of drug use in the neighborhood. Drug paraphernalia, including needles and glasses with drug residue has been found on the streets. Jill stated that drug use is rampant.

Physical violence was and continues to be a part of the life of many in the neighborhood around North Elementary School. Osofsky (1995) stated that reactions to violence are similar to those of early abuse and neglect, as well as possible symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Twenty-seven of the sixty-one recorded behavioral incidents at North Elementary School during the 2014 – 2015 involved a physical altercation, attack or threat of attack. Michaela witnessed and was a victim of abuse. Danielle did not report physical violence, but stated that her husband verbally abuses her and her children. Michaela stated that she has witnessed people get being beaten in the neighborhood and that neighbors have been robbed at gunpoint. Patton and Johnson (2009) explained that adolescents, males, members of non-dominant race or ethnicity groups, and low-income individuals have a higher probability of being exposed to violence. School aged children who are exposed to violence often experience increases in anxiety, nightmares, sleep disturbances, and difficulty paying attention (Pynoos, 1993).

Educational experiences. Participants in this study have a variety of educational backgrounds. Danielle and Michaela dropped out of high school. Danielle went on to complete her GED and Associates Degree in business. She has attempted to complete her Bachelor’s Degree several times, but has not done so due to the birth of her children, lack of childcare and most recently the separation from her husband. Michaela stated that she studied for her GED, but did not take the test. Mary graduated earning her high school diploma, associates degree, bachelor’s degree and master’s degree. Both Danielle and Michaela attended several schools growing up and Danielle has attended several colleges to work on her post high school degrees.
Though she enjoyed learning, Danielle disliked high school and described high school as social fun. She likes college because she has more freedom to make choices and there is more diversity. Michaela and Mary did not discuss their feelings about school.

Participants’ parents’ involvement in schooling. All of the participants reported that their own parents were not actively involved in their schooling. Evans (2004) explained that low-income parents are less responsive, more authoritarian, and less involved in children’s school. Danielle’s mother never saw her report card as Danielle would sign it and return it to school. When Danielle overdosed on Sudafed, her mother would not go to the school for her. Michaela was never really with her mother; she was always with her friend and her friend’s mother. The focus of Mary’s mother was not academics, which was unlike that of most Taiwanese families. Clearly, Danielle, Michaela, and Mary were trying to be more involved in their children’s education than their own parents were.

Lived Experiences Today

Participants’ interactions with school today. Education is important to all of the participants. All of the participants want their children to do well in school. Michaela stated that she wants her children to graduate and do better than she did in school; school is important. Jensen (2009) states that family income correlates with children’s academic success, especially during preschool, kindergarten and primary years.

Both Michaela and Mary have moved several times over the past few years. These moves have resulted in their children attending several different schools. One factor in student success in school is attendance and stability rate. The stability rate is the students who were enrolled in the school from the beginning of the year until the end of the year. At North Elementary School, the stability rate was 90% in 2014 for low-income students as well as the
general population. However, over the same period of time, the rate was only 73% for English Language Learners. One of Michaela’s children was absent nine days, another fourteen. Both were tardy between five and ten days. One of Danielle’s children was absent fifteen, another ten. They were tardy four and nine times and dismissed two and eight times. At North Elementary School absenteeism for ten or more days was 29.8% in 2014 and 36.3% in 2013.

All of the participants stated that they go to the school for meetings, try to attend different events, and communicate with at least the classroom teacher. Other than meetings, neither Danielle nor Michaela told of any school events that they had actually attended. Mary stated that she had volunteered at North Elementary School, but that it had been a requirement to receive governmental cash benefits. Both Michaela and Mary mentioned conversations with the school psychologist and Michaela stated that the school psychologist is “the best”. Lewis, Kim and Bey (2011) explain that teachers can help parents to be involved in this way by providing conferences, phone calls, language interpreters, useful notices, memos, and newsletters on school policies, reforms, transitions, choice of schools, and available courses, programs, and activities within schools, as well as by sending home folders of students’ work weekly or monthly for parents’ comments.

All of the participants in the interviews believe that the school does not need to change anything academically. They all like the small size of the school and recognize that the staff knows the students well. The annual school survey supports this belief. The school provides activities that are beneficial, including an egg hunt, movie nights, dance club, and extra support in math.

Two specific concerns were raised about North Elementary School during the interviews. Danielle was upset that the principal filed with the Department of Children and Families against
her for neglect. She stated that the principal was condescending and claimed that Danielle was drunk when picking up her children. Michaela feels that the school needs to do more about addressing the issue of bullying.

**Challenges.** Danielle, Michaela, Mary and Jill all discussed concerns that affect their lives personally or other people’s lives in the neighborhood on a daily basis. Lack of transportation prevents Danielle and Michaela from running errands, searching for a desirable job, having children participate in activities, and efficiently visiting the different government support offices. Danielle explained that her children want to participate in different activities throughout the town; however, they are unable to do so due to transportation issues. The lack of transportation has prevented both Michaela and Danielle from getting to school activities as well. The local bus transportation system is inconvenient due to irregular schedules. The bus routes do not visit every needed location, bus transfers need to be made in the center of town, and the schedules are not always convenient. Taxis are expensive as well as being unreliable.

The local newspaper regularly reports on the heroin problem and violence in the local community. As already stated, drug paraphernalia, including needles and glasses with drug residue, are scattered in the neighborhood. A man overdosed and was laying in the parking lot of Michaela’s apartment building. When talking to me, Michaela lowered her voice while discussing the drug use in the neighborhood demonstrating that she did not want any of the neighbors hearing her. Jill stated that it is clear that the neighbors are using drugs, as they do not hide the use. Violence is common. There was a shooting of two young men one night and a resident was jumped while his girlfriend looked on. Michaela has told her daughter that the sound of gunfire is fireworks. She has three locks on her door and only allows her children to play in the backyard of the house. In addition, Michaela explained that if her children are not in
school, they are with her. When there is regular violence occurring in their neighborhood, to their child or a child they know, parents may become overprotective, hardly allowing their children out of their sight (Osofsky, 1995, p. 786). Jill believes that the issue of violence and drugs becomes worse when the children become teenagers. She feels that there is little for the teenagers to do to keep busy, so they cause trouble. The parents are not involved with entertaining them.

Money is a daily concern, though not outwardly stated by all. Housing is expensive as all three participants discussed. Michaela, Danielle and Mary are or have been homeless. Danielle and Michaela both struggle with paying their rent. Danielle stated that she needs to decide between “paying the cable or rent”. Michaela needed support one month by having North Elementary School pay her rent. Mary currently lives with her aunt and uncle, but is considered homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act (1987). She is concerned about her housing in the future because her uncle is considering moving back to Taiwan. Danielle and Mary spoke about receiving state assistance. Although Michaela did not state that she receives financial assistance, it can be inferred that she does. Mary is a United States citizen and would like her boys to become U.S. citizens. However, the $2,500 per child cost is beyond her means. Danielle explained that she feels that the current welfare system is counterproductive. She explained that if you receive cash benefits, you are not able to save money. If you put money in the bank, then the benefits stop. Danielle would like to not be dependent on the system, but she does not know how to do so without losing benefits too quickly. All participants struggle to obtain the finances necessary to address their needs and wants.

Because her first language is Chinese, Mary struggles with communication. Paperwork can be difficult because she is not sure what is being asked. When people talk fast, she has
difficulty keeping track of the conversation. Cultural differences occasionally occur, but Mary states she understands them and is okay with them. For example, in Taiwan, individuals often wear masks in order to stay healthy. However, in the United States, individuals only wear masks if they are ill. Stanfield (1985) shows, we must be cautious that the dominant group does not monopolize resources and force the other groups to adopt the dominant group’s norms and beliefs.

**Community support and resources received**

Epstein (1994) explains that there are many reasons for developing school, family and community partnerships with the most important being to help students succeed in school and life. In addition, partnerships improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and the community, and help teachers with their work. Parents need to know about the many different resources available in the community. Mary explained that one must ask questions about the type of help that is needed and there is usually someone who can provide help finding the resource. Danielle receives section 8 housing which allows her to pay approximately twenty percent of her monthly rent. Michaela has received support from the school to pay her rent. Danielle, Michaela, and Mary each receive all, or a portion of, the following: daycare vouchers, fuel assistance, food stamps, cash benefits and Mass Health. The paperwork is difficult, but Mary explained that all but the housing office are willing to assist with paperwork. A local health clinic helped Mary apply for health insurance by completing the forms for her. According to the Children’s Aid Society (2001), many children have never seen a doctor or dentist. Hardiman and Jackson (1997) state that oppression occurs in communities with limited access to medical care. Camp scholarships and reduced tuition for sports are
available to students who qualify. Because it is a school wide Title One school, there is a
summer school program for some students at North Elementary School. Local food pantries
provide free food. Danielle and Mary often depend on others for rides to complete grocery
shopping and they reported that people are willing to assist. Through Mass Health and the
doctor’s approval, Michaela has been able to take advantage of medical transportation to Boston.

**Support network.** Each of the participants has created a support network that is
primarily non-family based. Jensen (2009) state that poor children have fewer support networks,
live in neighborhoods with fewer positive social role models, and adolescents are more likely to
rely on peers rather than adults. Danielle and Michaela reported that their families have not been
overly supportive. Mary’s mother and sister are in Taiwan and therefore unable to help. Danielle
does not have a car of her own and must rely on her estranged husband at times. In order for her
son to join the school band, Danielle had to find another parent, who would drive him to the
nearby school for practice, transport him to North Elementary School, and watch her youngest
child. On days when Danielle is working, her mother watches the children. Her children
constantly complain about this to Danielle. Danielle, Michaela and Mary are not hesitant to ask
people that they know for assistance if it benefits their children. Michaela’s friends have become
family. They bring her grocery shopping or pick up supplies when needed. Her friends have
become the people to whom she talks and on whom she relies. The mother of one of her
children’s classmates is trying to help Michaela find new housing. Mary has met four mothers
from North Elementary School at the playground. Mary said it is “nice to have someone to talk
to”. Mary has also arranged for a mother to transport her child between daycare and North
Elementary School for half-day kindergarten. All of the participants have created support
networks that make their daily lives easier.
Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs served as a lens to understand the needs of primary caregivers in the North Elementary School district. Maslow’s theory explains that individual basic needs need to be addressed in order for individuals to grow within the community and be active contributors to society. Before the higher-order needs can influence behavior, the lower level or physiological needs must be substantially satisfied. According to Hagerty (1999), if the physiological needs are not satisfied, then all efforts will be focused toward attaining that goal.

Physiological needs, which include air, food, water, sleep and other basic needs to survive is the first and primary needs of Maslow’s hierarchy. Much of the conversations with participants in this study focused around physiological needs. All of the community and state supports that all of the interview participants receive are related to food, heating, housing, and other necessary supports to live. Danielle, Michaela and Mary all receive financial supports in order to meet their physiological needs. Based upon what the state provides, Danielle said there is plenty of money for food. She has learned how to be frugal with money and purchase what they need. At times Danielle needs to make decisions on which bills to pay. Michaela reached out to North Elementary School to have her rent paid one month. She told me that money to buy necessities is often an issue. Mary discussed the many food pantries in and around the neighborhood. Both Danielle and Michaela discussed the issue of transportation, which sometimes makes meeting some of these needs difficult. Homelessness has affected all three participants and although all have a regular place to live/sleep now, it really seems to be at the forefront of Michaela’s thoughts. By her comments that many of the apartments in the neighborhood where she lives are used as shelters, Jill supports this need. All of the participants discussed physiological needs as a central focus of their conversations.
Safety includes security of environment, employment, resources, health and property. Michaela was the participant who focused the most on safety. In her apartment, she has three locks on the door and she has developed a special knock with her children before they can open the door. Her children are only allowed to play in the backyard because she is afraid of stray bullets and drugs that are present in the neighborhood. Danielle discussed living in a "roach infested" motel with her son earlier in her life. She was obviously not pleased with this living situation. In order to receive her housing allowance at the time, Danielle had to walk along a very busy main road with her young son. Again, she was unhappy with the lack of safety. Jill supported the idea of safety in her discussions as has already been stated.

Belongingness includes love, friendship, intimacy and family. As Hagerty (1999) discussed, humans need to have interpersonal attachments and feel a sense of belonging. All three women have been divorced or separated. Children are a major part of all three of the women’s lives. Michaela described herself as “supermom” and said that she loves to have children around. Danielle and Michaela have both had children with different men; some of the fathers are no longer involved in the lives of their children. In order to fulfill belongingness, Danielle, Michaela, and Mary have created their own support networks. Mary went so far as to say that sometimes you need someone to talk to and family is not an option. The support network that many of the women have created has also helped to support their physiological needs in order to food shop or get to agencies for support.

Esteem includes confidence, self-esteem, achievement, and respect. Danielle, Michaela and Mary are proud of what they have accomplished. Michaela exclaimed that no matter what happens or how many times she gets knocked down, she gets back up and keeps going. I think that this can be said for all of these women even though they still struggle with certain aspects of
daily life. Danielle wants to complete her bachelor’s degree and obtain a job that would use her skills. The fact that she has been unable to do so clearly upsets her. She is currently going through a divorce, but unwillingly depends on her husband for transportation. Michaela suffers from anxiety and depression. The confrontation with her neighbor over bullying issues between their daughters has had a lasting emotional effect on Michaela. She did not complete high school or earn her G.E.D., but hopes her children do so. In addition, Michaela was let go from her job after only a few weeks. This had a major effect on her as she sought advice to determine if the release warranted legal action. Mary lives with her aunt and uncle. Though she appreciates their willingness to shelter her family, she discussed that there are numerous conflicts.

The top tier of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is self-actualization and includes morality, creativity, and problem solving. Hagerty (1999) suggested that access to higher education could be categorized under self-actualization as higher education encourages creativity and knowledge generation. This tier is often one that many have difficulty reaching. Mary has completed a master’s degree, but currently does not have a job. Her original associate’s degree was in horticulture, but she does not appear to have any interest in pursuing this career path. Only one participant, Danielle, expressed any interest in wanting independence from the “system”.

Most of the conversations focused on lower tiered needs, such as food, shelter, medical coverage, and safety. These needs are the priorities of the participants and the state helps them meet these needs with financial support. Both Michaela and Mary expressed their desire for belongingness throughout their interviews. Danielle’s current marital issues and the ways her husband treat both her and her children are clearly disturbing her. She stated that she is a loner, but it was apparent that she too wants connections to others as she has reached out for support.
and appreciates the support she has received. The top tier, self-actualization, does not seem to be a priority or even addressed at this time by the participants.

**Implications for Practice**

Epstein (1994) explains that there are many reasons for developing school, family and community partnerships with the most important being to help students succeed in school and life. In addition, partnerships improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and the community, and help teachers with their work. To grow up healthy emotionally, children under the age of three need a strong, reliable primary caregiver who provides consistent and unconditional love, guidance and support; safe, predictable and stable environments; ten to twenty hours each week of meaningful interactions; and enrichment through complex activities (Jensen, 2009, p. 15). The following supports may address many of the challenges that participants face.

**Academics.** Both Danielle and Mary discussed having difficulty understanding the “new math”. Mary did mention that the unit family letters sent home are helpful. Parent education sessions to help their child understand math, as well as explaining the reasons for the “new” math instruction would be beneficial. The annual school survey results showed that parent workshops in this area are warranted. Epstein (1994) describes learning at home is a form of parent involvement. Parents help students with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. Teachers can help parents to become involved in this way by providing information on homework policies, skills required for students in all subjects at each grade level, how to monitor schoolwork at home, and how to assist students in improving skills on various school assessments. Danielle is concerned about the amount of testing being
conducted in schools today. Conducting an interest inventory would help teachers know a child’s possible job interests and personal interests allowing them to design their instruction to address their future more specifically. The school needs to reach out and communicate more about bullying. Bullying prevention was supported as a priority for North Elementary School in the school survey.

**Activities for students and older children.** Participants expressed their satisfaction with many of the activities that the school has conducted. Activities include: egg hunt, movie night, dance club after school, breakfast every morning and extra support in math for the children. Continue these activities and possibly expand upon the ideas in order to “keep the students busy” as Jill described.

**Increasing parent attendance at events.** In order to increase participation of families that do not speak English, have a translator at all events to help ease communication and discussions. Parents who regularly attend events could invite others to attend events with them as an outreach program. Continuing this practice for each event could increase attendance at all events.

**Community supports.** The cost of college is very high and often out of reach for many. Providing counseling about how to apply for financial assistance/scholarships may increase the number of individuals attending college and seeking higher education. Informational sessions will also inform parents of the financial supports offered to low income families. Opportunities for individuals to receive tax assistance would be beneficial. Increase police intervention and presence in the neighborhoods where violence and drugs are more prevalent.

**Support networks.** The participants created much of their own support networks without their extended family’s involvement. In order to help parents build strong support
networks and build the strength of the community, regular family events involving children and opportunities for parents to interact with each other would allow parents to meet new friends and possibly new supports. These meetings would help to create an exchange program (I care for your child then you care for mine) such as Danielle discussed, as well as to help develop ideas for childcare.

**Focus group locations.** As evidenced by the participation in the focus group, individuals may not be comfortable with formalized discussion at the school. Focus groups should be held in community settings where caregivers go to increase participation. Regular meetings in neighborhood settings, such as churches or community agencies, will create opportunities for caregivers and school staff to have open conversations about community needs and identify needed supports.

**Transportation.** The transportation system needs to be improved. As Michaela discussed, even though North Elementary School is considered a walking school, a bus to and from school option could be provided, especially in bad weather. More frequent, regularly scheduled public transportation is needed to allow better access to stores and to the different financial support offices.

**Conducting GED courses, workshops and college courses.** Two participants dropped out of high school; one earned her GED, the other studied but never completed it. Conducting GED courses at North Elementary School would provide a safe and convenient neighborhood location, which would allow individuals to earn an equivalent high school diploma. Running college courses at North Elementary School would also allow community members to continue their education. The annual school survey results identified adult computer classes as a possibility for topics.
**Resource office.** Danielle discussed the difficulty of getting to the different offices that provide financial support. Mary and Danielle discussed the difficulty of completing the paperwork and the time it takes to travel to the offices. Danielle’s frustration was evident about how she feels the system is broken and encourages people to stay on the system for support. Similar to the health clinic that Mary discussed, creating a satellite office at North Elementary School or having a representative at North Elementary School several days per month would be beneficial. This individual or individuals could also serve as a counselor to work with people so that they could begin the process of weaning themselves off state and federal assistance.

**Childcare option.** Mary discussed the difficulty with the half-day kindergarten program. Because of the half-day kindergarten program, it requires Mary (and other parents) to pick up or drop off their child midday. She discussed how this made working difficult. If North Elementary School were to create a full day kindergarten program or a childcare option that accepted vouchers at the school, then parents would not have the additional concern of the midday pick up / drop off.

**Teenagers as role models.** Jill discussed the boredom shown and trouble caused by some of the teenage students. North Elementary School has created many different activities for their students. The offerings could be extended to the teenagers. Reginald Clark (1988) found that economically disadvantaged children should be involved in constructive learning activities during the non-school hours to get better grades in school than their more passive peers (Children’s Aid Society, 2001, p. 30). Activities could be conducted right after school and in the evenings for teenagers. Additionally, teenagers could conduct programs for the younger students or provide childcare while parents participated in GED courses, college courses or other trainings. The teenagers would be seen as role models rather than troublemakers.
Implications for future research

As a result of this study, the lives of the caregivers of North Elementary School were more fully understood. The interviews with the caregivers revealed many, but most likely not all, the challenges that they endure and the ways they cope with those challenges.

Additional studies with other families, particularly English as a second language families, should be considered to enhance the data collected. Families who speak English as a second language or who do not speak English could provide insight regarding communicating with the school. Both written and verbal communication from the school should be conducted in the languages of the community in order to create two-way communication between home and school. This type of communication could also increase involvement in the school, as well as increase participation in further studies. Further, such a study might provide information on obtaining support from community resources. Discussions could also be centered on their children’s progress learning the English language.

As a result of this study, ideas by which the school could engage with the community and additional supports for families have been identified. These supports may have been implemented in other communities and future research studies could involve the examination of how this was accomplished. The success or lack of success, costs and funding sources for implementation, developing plans for implementation, implementing the supports and measuring the effects of these ideas could determine if these supports should be implemented. It is important to note that each school and each community is different and the success of a support may differ accordingly.

The staff and volunteers of North Elementary School conduct many different events for both the school community and the community at large. Analyzing who regularly attend the
events would help to better understand what group or groups of people currently take part. Identifying the attendees of school events could assist the school to design events for a wider variety of community members and/or to target groups of people who are not currently attending.

A future study might review quantitative data from the school to increase understanding of the narratives. Analyzing attendance data could assist the school administration and teachers to further understand the lives and issues facing the students and families. For instance, low attendance days might be correlated to poor weather or police reports of violence in the neighborhoods. In addition, attendance might be correlated to the distance a student lives from school.

The participants in this study were generally positive about their feelings regarding North Elementary School. This is only one point of view. Conducting a study that attempts to reach caregivers who are not as positive as the participants in this study may provide an understanding of a wider selection of the community.

**Problem of Practice Revisited**

North Elementary School has created multiple opportunities to build family and community engagement. The view of North Elementary School is overall positive from the participants in the study and those who responded to the annual school survey. North Elementary School has not been able to sustain regular parent or community presence at the school by some subgroups. Danielle and Michaela attend meetings at school but did not expand on the events that they attend. Mary mentioned going to one event after school, but the frequency is unknown.

There are many circumstances affecting the families who live within the boundaries of the North Elementary School district. Danielle, Michaela, Mary, and Jill identified homelessness,
transportation, drugs and violence, paying necessary bills, and quality living arrangements as personal and community concerns. Resources are available to address many of these concerns, but having knowledge of the resources or obtaining the resources is unknown or difficult at times.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the challenges that primary caregivers of North Elementary School students face in order to effectively communicate and support both students and families. In addition, the purpose was to develop possibilities for building a reciprocal relationship between home and school to improve the academic success of all students. The study focused on the research questions: 1) What are the lived experiences of primary caregivers of North Elementary School as they reflect on their own educational journey? 2) What are the lived experiences of primary caregivers as they currently engage with North Elementary School about their children? 3) In what ways can primary caregivers see opportunities for future engagement with North Elementary School?

The findings indicated that education is important to the caregivers and they want their children to complete high school. The caregivers are involved in their children’s lives and discussed their own parents as not being positively involved in their lives. These findings, along with the positive view of North Elementary School, demonstrates the need to use these beliefs and build upon them by recognizing the caregiver’s worth as a means of engagement.

Opportunities were identified where both the school and the community could develop future engagement with those served by North Elementary School. The ideas are not limited to the school alone; they need to be community based. The findings demonstrate that the school
needs to provide instruction to parents in areas of math and writing, in order that they might help
their children. In addition, opportunities to further the caregivers’ education could be offered.
Community supports are needed with the most critical focusing on transportation and easier
methods to apply for financial supports. This study illustrated the need for North Elementary
School to communicate with caregivers in smaller settings to understand their needs and explain
ways to support their children.
References


http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.07.004.


the Boston Public Schools. Boston Public Schools, Boston MA.
APPENDIX A

Site Access Letter

Dear Principal,

My name is Adam Blaisdell and I am a student researcher in a doctoral program at Northeastern University. I am writing to request access to your school in order to conduct a research study. The following information is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to grant me access for my study.

I am interested in interviewing three parents at your Elementary School. The purpose of this study to is to better understand the challenges faced by the primary caretakers who have students who attend North Elementary School. In addition, this study will help to identify areas of supports that primary caregivers identify as needed from the school. I will interview parent participants on three separate occasions. During parent interviews, we will discuss the primary caregiver’s experiences in school, with the school, in the community and events that influence their thoughts and actions about both school and the community. I will request a meeting with you that will be focused on examining demographic information and examining documents to better understand your school and families. All interviews will be conducted in a quiet, private location, specified by the participant, and will take about one hour each time.

In order to obtain participants, a “Call for Participants” will be sent home in written form. I will request that individuals who are interested in participating return the “Call for Participants” to the main office of your school in a sealed envelope. I ask that you hold these envelopes for me to pick up. If there are more than six interested participants, I may hold a focus group to hear the stories of additional caregivers.

There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort for those that choose to participate, nor is there a foreseeable benefit other than the research results will be shared in the hopes that it will give you some insight into some successful strategies to encourage caregivers to participate fully in school on behalf of their children. Participants will be given a pseudonym to protect their identity throughout the interview process and in the final written document. The recorded interviews will be kept on my personal computer that is password protected, and I will maintain full confidentiality. The interviews and all data will be destroyed after three years.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time. Those who participate in the one-on-one interviews will be given a $30 gift card to a neighborhood food establishment as soon as the final interview is complete.

If you have questions about this study, please feel free to contact me at blaisdell.a@husky.neu.edu or 774-454-6841 or the principal researcher, Dr. Carol Young who is my doctoral study advisor. She can be reached at 508-587-2834. 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.
If you agree to grant me access to your site, please sign your consent with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the procedures. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Signature of Principal

Signature of Student Researcher

Printed Name

Printed Name

Date

Date
APPENDIX B

Call for Participants - Recruitment Letter

Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Adam Blaisdell and I am a student researcher at Northeastern University completing a doctor of education program. I also was the former principal of North Elementary School. I am inviting you to participate in a research study to better understand the lives of caregivers who have students who attend North Elementary School. In addition, this study could help to identify areas of supports that primary caregivers identify as needed from the school.

As the former principal of North Elementary School, this study is important to me. My goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges that families face in the community and how these challenges affect interactions with the school. The information from this study will inform administrators and staff members of needed supports and reasons behind the needed supports.

I invite all members of the North Elementary School community to participate. However, I am extremely interested in having parents whose children receive free or reduced lunch or parents whose primary language is not English participate.

If you decide to take part in this study, I will interview you on three separate occasions in a one on one setting. During these interviews, we will discuss your background, your own experiences in school, your current interactions with the school and in the community, events that influence your thoughts about both school and the community, and ideas you have for future supports that could be helpful. Each of the interviews will last between forty-five and sixty minutes and will be audiotaped so that I am sure I have an accurate record of your thoughts. There will be three people chosen to participate in the one on one interviews. If you are chosen to participate, I am asking that you commit to participating in all three interviews. In addition, those who participate in the three one on one interviews will be given a $30 gift card to one of the neighborhood food establishments as soon as you complete the final interview.

If there are more than three people interested in participating, I may be conducting a focus group. A focus group is a meeting of about ten people where we will discuss your own experiences in school, your current interactions with the school and in the community, current challenges, events that influence your thoughts about both school and the community, and ideas you have for future supports that could be helpful.

If you are interested, please complete the information below along with the brief survey. Please return the form in a sealed envelope to the main office of North Elementary School by March 31, 2015. I will be the only one to open these envelopes.

I hope that you will take advantage of this opportunity to share your thoughts and experiences.

If you are interested, please complete the information below. If you have any questions before you decide, please do not hesitate to contact me, Adam Blaisdell, blaisdell.a@husky.neu.edu or
you can call me at 774-454-6841. You can also contact my college advisor, Dr. Carol Young at 508-587-2834 or c.young@neu.edu if you have any questions.

Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Adam Blaisdell

Please complete this form to send into school.

I am interested in learning more about the research study:

Name: ____________________________________________________________

Telephone Number: ________________________________________________

Email Address: ____________________________________________________

Number of children at North Elementary School: _______________________

Total number of children you have: ___________________________________

What challenges do you face as a family on a daily basis?

Is English your primary language? ____ If not, what is your primary language? ____________________

Please send this form to the main office at school in a sealed envelope addressed to: Adam Blaisdell. Please send this form in by March 20th. I will be the only one to see this form and I will contact you.

Thank you!

Adam Blaisdell
APPENDIX C

Participant Consent Form

Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, Department: College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Carol Young, Principal Investigator, Adam Blaisdell, Student Researcher
Title of Project: Understanding Families of North Elementary School: A Narrative Research Study of One Suburban School

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?

I am asking you to be in this study because you are a parent of students at North Elementary School. However, I am extremely interested in having parents whose children receive free or reduced lunch or parents whose primary language is not English participate.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the lives and challenges faced by the primary caretakers who have students who attend North Elementary School. In addition, this study will help to identify areas of supports that primary caregivers identify as needed from the school.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, I will interview you on three separate occasions. During these interviews, we will discuss your background, your own experiences in school, your current interactions with the school and in the community, events that influence your thoughts about both school and the community, and ideas you have for future supports that could be helpful.

Participants in the focus group will meet for one session for approximately one hour.
Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

All interviews will be conducted in a quiet, private location, specified by the participant. Each interview will last between forty-five and sixty minutes.

Focus group participants will meet in a group of no more than ten for no more than sixty minutes. The focus group will take place at a public location such as the school library.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

If you feel uncomfortable replying to any of the questions that are asked, you are free to decline from answering. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time. You will be discussing personal details about your life, there is the slight chance of potential (non-physical) discomfort, but the risk of this is minimal.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There is no foreseeable benefit, other than strategies to improve communication with families may result from the study. All the results will be shared with you in the hopes that it will give you some insight as to the needs of our community.

Who will see the information about me?

You will be given a pseudonym to protect your identity throughout the interview process and in the final written document. The recorded interviews will be kept on my personal computer that is password protected, and I will maintain full confidentiality. The interviews and all data will be destroyed after three years.

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 will 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 my 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.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Adam Blaisdell at 774-454-6841 or via email at blaisdell.a@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Dr. Carol Young at c.young@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 $30 gift card to one of the neighborhood food establishments as soon as you complete the final interview. Participants in the possible focus group will not be paid for participation.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

It will not cost you anything to participate in this study.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**

You must be at least 21 years old to participate and a parent of a student at North Elementary School.
I agree to take part in this research.

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 D
Interview Questions

***If there is a focus group conducted, these questions will be used during one focus group.

Interview One – Historical Perspective

Background Information
• Please tell me a little about yourself, including your family, educational experiences, and where you are from.

Prompts if needed
• Where are you from?
• What is your cultural background?
• What is your educational background?
• How many children do you have and what grades are they currently in?
• What are you most proud of about yourself?
• How would others describe you?
• Is English your primary language?

School Experiences
• You told me a little about going to school, could you tell me more about your school experiences. What were some of the highlights of going to school? What were some of the parts that were not so good?
• How were your parents involved in your schooling?

Prompts if needed
  o Could you tell me about a positive experience that you remember from when you were in school growing up?
  o Could you tell me about a negative experience that you remember from when you were in school?
  o Could you tell me about how your parents were involved in school when you were growing up?

Interview Two – Current Day

Current School Experiences
• Could you tell me more about your school experiences today? What were some of the highlights with the school? What were some parts that are not so good?
• How are you involved in your child’s schooling?
• What are some issues that you and your family face? Discuss any supports for you and your family?
• If English is not your primary language, how do you describe the ease of communicating with school, accessing medical services, or conducting daily business (work, shopping, banking, etc.)?
Prompts if needed

Challenges and dealing with those challenges
- What are some of the greatest challenges you and your family faced growing up both in and outside of school?
- What are some of the greatest challenges you and your family face today both with school and outside of school? (Challenges in daily life? Family challenges? Support/services challenges?)
- How do you deal with these challenges for you and your family?
- How does the school support you and your family to deal with these challenges?
- Are there additional supports in the community that you can access?
- How do these challenges affect school, your children, your family and you?

Support Network
- Describe your current support network (family, school, community).
- Does your support network meet your current needs?
- What would you wish for in your support network that could help make life easier?

Interactions
- Could you describe your daily interactions with your children? Are the majority of the interactions positive or negative? Could you give a possible example?
- Could you describe your daily interactions with other community members? Are the majority of the interactions positive or negative? Could you give a possible example?
- Could you describe your daily interactions with school? Are the majority of the interactions positive or negative? Could you give a possible example?

Interview Three – Future

Opportunities / Supports
- What are some opportunities for future engagement with the school?
- What would help you support your children in their educational experience?

Additional information
- Is there any additional information that you would like to share about yourself, challenges you face on a daily basis and supports available to you?
- Is there anything you wish to share that we haven’t talked about that would help understand the needs of your family regarding the education of your child (children) and/or interaction with the school?
Appendix E
North Elementary Data - Behavioral Incidents, Student Attendance, Stability Rate

Behavioral Incidents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrespect Staff</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruptive Behavior</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Device Violation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graffiti</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate Comment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knife</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obscene Language</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obscene Behavior Written</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Incident</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Altercation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Attack</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Fight</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rough Housing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety Violation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat of Attack</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandalism</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>61</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student Attendance - Percentage of Students absent 10 or more days per year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students Included</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Students</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Stability Rate

### Stability Rate: All students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable #</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable %</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>89.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Stability Rate: Low-income students enrolled all year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable #</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable %</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>84.9</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td>90.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Stability Rate: ELL students enrolled all year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable #</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable %</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
North Elementary 2015 Family Survey

The North Elementary School Council conducts an annual family survey to identify the strengths, concerns and needs of North School. By completing this survey you will provide the council with important information that will be used to revise our School Improvement Plan. Please complete this survey by April 10, 2016. Thank you.

The North Elementary School Council - Council Member 1, Council Member 2, Council Member 3, Council Member 4, and Principal

1. My child is in grade (Please check all that apply if you have more than one child at North School)
   - Kindergarten
   - First Grade
   - Second Grade
   - Third Grade
   - Fourth Grade
   - Fifth Grade

2. How long have you had a student at North School?
   - It is our first year at North
   - 2-3 years
   - 4-6 years
   - 7-9 years
   - Forever! 10 + years

1/11 North
3. What do you like about North School?

[50 characters left.]

4. Please select what you think North’s top 3 priorities for change should be for next year?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>First Choice</th>
<th>Second Choice</th>
<th>Third Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying Prevention</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging Advance Learners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a Positive School Culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Student Academic Progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment:

[500 characters left.]

5. I feel that my child’s work in the classroom is:

- [ ] Too easy
- [ ] Appropriately challenging
- [ ] Too challenging
- [ ] Not sure

Comment:

[500 characters left.]
6. I feel comfortable speaking to instructional staff about my child's education and needs at school.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree
   - Do not know

   Comment:

   500 characters left.

7. I feel comfortable speaking to the principal about my child's education and needs at school.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree
   - Do not know

8. I read the school monthly newsletter ____________.
   - Always
   - Sometimes
   - Never

   Comment:

   500 characters left.

9. I find the school monthly newsletter helpful.
   - Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
10. My child receives ______________ homework. (including projects)
   - just the right amount of
   - too much
   - not enough
   - not applicable

11. I read with and/or discuss reading with my child ______________ times per week.
   - 0 times
   - 1 time
   - 2-3 times
   - 4 or more

12. North School Staff does an effective job communicating the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
148

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date: 9/24/2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Survey: Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My child’s academic progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School sponsored family events</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special school day activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment: 

500 characters left.

13. North School Teaching Staff does an effective job communicating grade level expectations in the following academic areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Art, Music, PE, Library, Computers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math, Reading &amp; Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science &amp; Social Studies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment: 

500 characters left.

14. An adult family member attended Open House this year?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Comment: 

500 characters left.
15. An adult family member volunteers at least once per year in the building.
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No
   Comment:

   500 characters left.

16. An adult family member has attended a class/grade level curriculum celebration within the last calendar year. (Science Fair, Reader’s Theatre, Vocabulary Parade, Animal Project, etc)
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No
   Comment:

   500 characters left.

17. I like the format and frequency of North Award Ceremonies.
   - [ ] Agree
   - [ ] Somewhat Agree
   - [ ] Disagree
   Comment:

   500 characters left.

18. North Kid Tickets are helping to promote positive behavior with my child.
   - [ ] Agree
     - [ ] Somewhat Agree
19. My child feels safe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>in the classroom.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on the playground.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>during indoor recess.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the lunchroom.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the hallways/stairways.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>during arrival.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>during dismissal.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the restroom.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment:

500 characters left.

20. Over the summer I would like my child to participate in the following activities at North School.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring 2 times a week (1 hour per day)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer School 4 days a week (3 hours per day)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Crafts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized Playground Activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book checkout at the library</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening Family Fun Events</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
21. North School strives to meet the culturally diverse needs of the student population.

- Agree
- Disagree
- Not Sure

Comment:

500 characters left.

22. When is a good time to offer parent programs? (Please choose all that apply)

- 8:00 AM
- 2:30 PM
- 3:30 PM
- 6:00 PM
- 7:00 PM

Comment:

500 characters left.

23. I would be interested in attending the following parent workshops.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding my child’s math program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding my child’s reading program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding my child’s writing program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising a challenging child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Nutrition</td>
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<td>Adult learning English as a Second Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult Exercise class</td>
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<tr>
<td>GED program (Hi-Set)</td>
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<td>Parent/Guardian support group</td>
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<td>Adult Art classes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Comment:

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24. I know North is a Schoolwide Title 1 School.
   - [ ] Agree
   - [ ] Disagree

Comment:

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25. I understand what it means to be a Schoolwide Title 1 School.
   - [ ] Agree
   - [ ] Disagree

Comment:
26. I know my rights as a parent under the No Child Left Behind Act.
   - Agree
   - Disagree
   Comment:
   500 characters left.

27. My child has attended the Title 1 Lending Library__________ times this school year.
   - 0 times
   - 1-2 times
   - 3 or more times
   Comment:
   500 characters left.

28. I am pleased with the arrival procedures implemented at North School.
   - Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Disagree
   Comment:
29. I am pleased with the dismissal procedures implemented at North School.
   
   - Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Disagree

   Comment:

   500 characters left.

30. I would be interested in joining a new parent council led by the principal to exchange ideas on ways to improve North School. This group would meet during the school day approximately 4 times per year.
   
   - Agree
   - Disagree
   - Maybe

   Comment:

   500 characters left.