PRESCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS:
HOW TEACHERS MAKE SENSE OF THEIR EXPERIENCES

A thesis presented
by

Elizabeth J. Bienia

to
The School of Education

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 2016
Abstract

One of the major goals of the preschool system is to contribute to closing the achievement gap between the most economically disadvantaged in the country and the middle class (Morgan, 2011; Rose, 2010). Among families who sent their children to preschool and partnered with educators at those schools in meaningful ways, studies showed higher scores on readiness tests, greater social skills, lower behavioral issues, and few crimes committed (Education for All, 2008; Schweinhart; 2002; Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores, 2005; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). The preschool teachers’ role in engaging families in an educational partnership is a key component of academic success (Epstein, 2011; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein & Lloyd, 2013).

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to examine how eight teachers in one Massachusetts urban public preschool made sense of their experience engaging in home school partnerships within an integrated classroom setting. The most prominent themes that emerged that relate to both Epstein’s (1987, 2011) theory and the experience of preschool teachers as they partner with families include: Disconnected by Differences, Connected through Empathy, Comradery through Shared Experiences, and Security from Administrative Support.

The findings reflected several of the concepts found in previous research. The difficulties in bridging the gap between home and school resulted in frustration for the participants. However, the participants were willing to continue making these efforts because they recognized the importance of this connection. Particularly, several participants were aware that student from English Second Language backgrounds required additional support. Their awareness of this
support extended to understanding the importance of home visits, and they demonstrated a willingness to make these visits. Opportunities for future research were also suggested.

*Keywords:* interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), qualitative research, Family School Partnership Framework, home school partnerships, preschool, teacher experiences, integrated classrooms.
Acknowledgements

As I am winding down my dissertation, I am left with perhaps one of the most challenging parts of this project: finding a way to publicly thank so many who have had a tremendously positive impact on my life. First, I want to thank my parents who were my first teachers and who have stood by me through all the wonderful times as well as those that were more difficult. They instilled in me a love for education, a passion for life, and a strong sense of the importance of family. My father, a career dentist and a member of the Board of Education in our small town of Metuchen, NJ, has always been a wonderful cheerleader, role model, and someone who I cannot help but want to emulate in so many ways as I become the second “Dr” in the family. Please know that I love and admire the man that you are. And to my mother, I want her to know that she has a special place in my heart and that I am grateful for her love, friendship, guidance over the years and late night phone calls where she offered advice and support when I needed it the most. You will never know how much I appreciated your buying me a ‘congratulations on your graduation’ card the day I started this doctoral program—knowing this served as a constant reminder that you believed in me (and that the pressure was on from the outset to finish). Thank you mom and dad for being you!

To my children CJ, Matthew and Kyle and their wives Allyson, Karyn and Anna— the six of you make me proud to be your mother (and technically mother-in-law to some of you but I never think of you that way). You are all such hard working, intelligent, and incredible people who are making your own way as individuals and couples. I see bright futures for you all, not to mention grandchildren (but we can discuss that later).

I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to recognize my doctoral committee. First, I want to thank Dr. Tova Sanders who has served as my primary advisor for the past two
years. I am grateful for your guidance and mentorship and for providing me with ample opportunities to experience the midnight hour. Second, to Dr. Sandy Nickel, who agreed to serve as my second advisor during the final stage of my dissertation. Thank you for your willingness to support and assist me. Third, I wish to recognize and thank Dr. Nicholas Young, the Dean of Doctoral Programs at American International College, for agreeing to serve as the external third reader for my study. You provided a keen eye and a gentle shove towards the finish line and beyond.

To Dr. Jan Stetson, your belief in my future abilities, and suggestions that I eventually pursue a doctoral degree, made me believe that accomplishing this feat was possible. Please know that your faith in me helped give me the confidence to take this leap of faith forward. Ron and Regina, your editing suggestions were invaluable and made it possible for me to finally complete and close this chapter of my life. Additionally, I want to thank my many friends and colleagues from Gateway Regional Public Schools, Springfield Public Schools and Glickman Elementary School who have been an incredible support system for me each and every step of the way. Your friendship and constant reminders that I could make it mattered to me far more than you will all ever know. To my yoga friends and students who kept me balanced on my mat even on the most difficult days and to my friends near and far - thank you for being such a wonderful support system through every phase of this journey. Last, but certainly not least, I wish to acknowledge the teachers who participated in this study - without your input and assistance, my research would not have been possible. For that I will be forever grateful.

“Every child deserves a champion – an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists that they become the best they can possibly be.” Rita Pierson
# Table of Contents

## Chapter One: Introduction

- Problem of Practice .......................................................... 11
- Research Question ............................................................. 12
- Significance of Research Problem ......................................... 12
- Theoretical Framework ......................................................... 14

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

- History of Preschool Education ............................................. 18
- Importance of Preschool Education ......................................... 21
- Importance of Preschool in the Urban Setting ......................... 23
  - Preschool Studies .............................................................. 25
    - Georgia and North Carolina Studies .................................. 25
    - Head Start Study ........................................................... 26
  - Longitudinal Studies .......................................................... 27
    - High/Scope Perry Preschool Study .................................. 27
    - Tulsa Pre-K Study .......................................................... 28
  - New York, South Carolina and Chicago Preschool Studies ....... 29
  - Economic Analysis of the Effects of Preschool ..................... 30
- Nature and Importance of Home School Partnerships ................ 32
- Home School Partnerships ................................................... 33
  - Teacher’s Role in Parent Partnership .................................. 36
  - What We Know About How Teachers Make Sense of their Experience .......... 40
## Chapter Three: Research Design

- Qualitative Research ................................................................. 42
- Paradigm: Constructivism-Interpretivism .................................... 42
- Research Approach ....................................................................... 44
  - Historical Roots ....................................................................... 44
  - Hermeneutics .......................................................................... 45
  - Idiography ............................................................................ 46
  - Participants ........................................................................... 46
  - Research Site .......................................................................... 47
  - Recruitment and Access .......................................................... 47
  - Protection of Human Subjects .................................................. 47
- Data Collection Method .............................................................. 48
  - Data Storage ........................................................................... 48
  - Data Analysis Process ............................................................ 49
  - Trustworthiness and Verification ............................................ 50
  - Positionality Statement ........................................................... 51
  - Researcher Bias ...................................................................... 56

## Chapter Four: Report of Research Findings .............................. 57
- Setting ........................................................................................ 58
- Participants ............................................................................... 58
- Limitations ............................................................................... 60
- Life Stories .............................................................................. 61
  - Emily .................................................................................... 61
Jane ...........................................................................................................62
Kiley ..........................................................................................................63
Madeline ....................................................................................................64
Mary ...........................................................................................................64
Pam .............................................................................................................65
Remy .........................................................................................................65
Sara ............................................................................................................66
Research Question ..................................................................................66
Findings and Analysis .............................................................................66
Super-Ordinate Theme #1: Disconnected by Differences .......................70
  Disconnected by Parent Mistrust ..........................................................70
  Challenged by Cultural and Communication Differences ...................71
  Challenged by Value Differences .........................................................72
Super-Ordinate Theme #2: Connected through Empathy .......................74
  Connected through Action ......................................................................74
  Positivity through Collaboration ..........................................................75
  Climate Creates Comfort ......................................................................76
Super-Ordinate Theme #3: Comradery through Shared Experiences ..........76
Super-Ordinate Theme #4: Security from Administrative Support .............79
  Security Promotes Risk-Taking .............................................................80
Summary .................................................................................................82

Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations ..................84
Interpretation of Findings .........................................................................84
Disconnected by Differences ................................................................. 84
  Links to Literature .................................................................................. 84
  Implications for Theory ......................................................................... 85
  Implications for Practice ....................................................................... 86
Connected through Empathy ................................................................. 87
  Links to Literature .................................................................................. 87
  Implications for Theory ......................................................................... 88
  Implications for Practice ....................................................................... 89
Comradery through Shared Experiences ............................................. 90
  Links to Literature .................................................................................. 90
  Implications for Theory ......................................................................... 90
  Implications for Practice ....................................................................... 91
Security from Administrative Support ................................................. 92
  Links to Literature .................................................................................. 92
  Implications for Theory ......................................................................... 92
  Implications for Practice ....................................................................... 92
Recommendations for Future Research ............................................... 94
  General Suggestions ............................................................................... 95
  Suggestions Specific to Themes ............................................................. 96
    Disconnected by Differences ............................................................... 96
    Connected through Empathy .............................................................. 97
    Comradery through Shared Experiences ............................................. 98
    Security from Administrative Support ............................................... 98
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 99

References ...................................................................................................................................................... 101

Appendix A: Letter from District Approving Research ................................................................. 117
Appendix B: Letter to Principal ............................................................................................................. 118
Appendix C: Letter to Participants ....................................................................................................... 119
Appendix D: Informed Consent Form ..................................................................................................... 120
Appendix E: Interview Protocol ............................................................................................................. 123
Appendix F: Request for Confidentiality: Transcription ........................................................................ 126
Chapter One: Introduction

Problem of Practice

The importance of home school partnerships cannot be overlooked as this vital connection provides the link to greater academic success for preschoolers now and in the future (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001; Reynolds, Temple, White, Ou, & Robertson, 2011; Urahan & Watson, 2006). These partnerships have never been more significant than in today’s urban setting where schools and families may be more disconnected due to many factors. Some of these factors include the inability of parents to help their children because of their own lack of education and/or ability level as well as a potential lack of transportation on the parent’s part (Reynolds et al., 2001; U.S. Department of Education, [DOE], 2001).

A successful connection between teachers and parents is essential to the academic success of preschool students (van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013). Such a connection refers to a partnership in which parents and teachers work together in a variety of ways to ensure the success of the student across all academic and social settings; yet research shows this connection is often difficult to create and maintain (Cox-Peterson, 2011; Grant & Ray, 2013). To better understand the role of the teacher in making connections with families in meaningful ways, the educational community must better understand how teachers make sense of their experiences engaging in home school partnerships.

Teachers served as the crucial link between policy and practice, institution and community, and families and administrators (Epstein, 2013; Duncan, 2015). Educators were assigned the difficult task of being exceptional teachers in the classroom, as well as being extraordinary networkers skilled in engaging families and the communities in which they work and live (Duncan, 2015). Teachers must carefully and continually build strong relationships between home and school. Especially in the urban setting, and specifically at the preschool level,
the challenge was to find the most effective approaches to successfully partnering with families to address and close learning and developmental gaps (Epstein, 2011, Grant & Ray, 2013, Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Federally mandated preschool programs were required through the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004 to educate students with disabilities along-side their developmentally same aged peers in order to maximize learning in the least restrictive environment while receiving necessary educational and related support services (Musgrove, 2012). Another premise of IDEA was that there should be “active parental involvement and support” (Boylan & Goldman, 2010, p. 17). This positive preschool experience provided an opportunity for parents to partner with their child’s teachers in meaningful ways to increase learning at home and at school. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how urban public school preschool teachers made sense of their experiences engaging in home school partnerships within an integrated classroom setting.

**Research Question**

How do eight teachers at one urban public preschool in western Massachusetts make sense of their experiences engaging in home school partnerships within an integrated classroom setting?

**Significance of Research Problem**

A plethora of research (Education for All, 2008; Schweinhart, 2002; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Yoshikawa et al., 2013) verified that students whose families committed to sending them to quality preschool programs and who partnered with schools and teachers in meaningful ways tended to score better on readiness tests, have fewer behavioral problems and better social skills, and commit fewer crimes. In addition, students who attended high quality preschools were
“40% less likely to need special education or to be kept back a grade, 30% more likely to graduate from high school, and twice as likely to go to college” (Reynolds et al., 2001, p. 3). These statistics demonstrated the need for preschool for all children but especially for urban children who generally had less experience with academic and social experiences prior to the start of kindergarten and first grade (Duncan et al., 2007; Stipek, 2006; DOE, 2010).

Adequate communication between school and home can be seen as a major cause of disparity in educational outcomes (Davis, 2000; McGilly, 2011). Recent studies indicated that a lack of educational achievement is less about financial means and inequality than it is about parental engagement in their child’s education coupled with the lack of academic early stimulus in a child’s life (Duncan et al., 2007; Stipek, 2006; DOE, 2010). Clearly, families play a critical role in all aspects of a child’s development and “family engagement is one of the strongest predictors of children’s school success” (Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, & Gordon; 2009, p. 22). It is vital then that families of preschool students are engaged in the process of learning through collaboration with school and/or teachers.

As of October 2014 only 29% of 4-year-old children and 4% of three-year-old children attended publicly funded preschools nationwide (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, Clarke Brown, & Horowitz, 2015). The number of preschoolers enrolled in public preschools has changed little in two years in Massachusetts with 4% of three-year-old children and 14% of four-year-old children attending publicly funded preschool (Barnett et al., 2015). In 2013, there were 30,000 preschoolers on waiting lists for preschool while their same-aged enrolled counterparts engaged in daily learning activities in a variety of public and private preschool settings (Haywoode, 2013; Johnson, 2013). These wait-listed preschoolers and their families were the very population that
schools needed to draw into the collaborative partnership of preschool education, and teachers were the conduit by which this collaboration was possible.

Practitioners are receptive to the idea that early childhood education is one of the most effective and practical ways to close the academic and socio-economic gaps separating the American poor from the American middle class (Epstein, 2010); thus, engaging urban families in building strong partnerships between home and school as a way to increase educational success cannot be overlooked (McGilly, 2011; National Education Association, 2008). The aim of this study, therefore, was to understand how urban preschool teachers made sense of their experiences engaging in home school partnerships as a means to further the discussion.

**Theoretical Framework**

Forming meaningful partnerships between teachers and families is no easy task nor is there only one framework to guide this work (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). While several theoretical frameworks show the need for connecting communities, families, and schools, Epstein’s Family-School Partnerships Framework (Epstein, 1987) most clearly explains the need for shared responsibility as a time-tested means to support student success. Epstein, a long-time researcher in the field of school and family partnerships, posits that children learn more when family, educators, and members of the community share in the responsibility for child development (Epstein, 1987, 2010). The assumption claims that if all members of the school community work in cooperation, then students are more likely to receive common messages from these sources regarding “the importance of school, of working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another, and of staying in school” (Epstein, 2010, p. 82). Additionally, when school leaders (teachers) think of students as children first they are more likely to include families in an educational partnership (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). For the purposes of this study, the focus
was how teachers made sense of their experiences engaging in home school partnerships. Teachers’ first focus on their connection to the families they work with, and it was the experiences of teachers engaging with families that was at the crux of this study.

Epstein’s seminal work (1987) used two interlocking models, external and internal, that exemplified the relationships between the child/student, family, school, and community (as shown in figure 1). The external model placed the child in the center of a Venn diagram with three overlapping spheres: family, school, and community. These external overlapping spheres of influence were manipulated, thus affecting a student’s ability to learn and grow depending on the extent of any or all overlap between the outlined parameters (Epstein, 1987; Epstein 1997; Epstein, 2010; Epstein, et al., 2009). Greater overlap created a better partnership; less overlap meant that each sphere took up the slack when other spheres lagged behind in collaboration of tasks. This push-pull effect was attributed to many factors such as family philosophies, backgrounds, developmental characteristics of the child, and actions of the school, family or community toward a united and cooperative effort (Epstein, 2011).

The external spheres of influence are governed by three forces: family, school and community. Each force includes the experiences, philosophies, and practices combined in each specific sphere, which provides the push-and-pull relationship between the three elements outlined in Epstein’s (1987) model. In addition, force A is considered to be time, age, and grade level of a child, which adds a further dimension to the forces between elements (Epstein, 1987; Epstein, 2011). The internal model places the child at the center of two overlapping segments of family and school (as shown in Figure 2). These are also termed the social relationship spheres of individual and institution (Epstein, 1987; Epstein, 2011; Epstein et al., 2009). These overlapping circles guide the social connections and interactions between families, students,
teachers, and community members. At the individual level, parents may interact with the teacher during a parent-teacher conference, while at the institutional level, families may come to school for an event or the principal may send a communication via phone, paper, or internet to all families. Epstein (2009) states, “if children feel cared for and if they are encouraged to work hard in the role of a student, they are more likely to do their best to learn to read, write, calculate, and learn other skills and talents and to remain in school” (p. 10).

This partnership came into laser focus when Epstein et al. (2009) explained the partnership from two opposing angles, including that of the teacher/administration in conjunction with the parent. The teacher/administrator partnership was tasked with creating a “family-like school” in which the institution welcomes all families…not just those who are easy to reach or whose student is successful (Epstein, 2009, p. 11). On the other end of the partnership spectrum was the parent whose job it was to create a more “school-like family” (Epstein et al., 2009, p.11).
In this case, the parent was tasked with reinforcing important concepts such as working hard, homework, and “activities that build student skills and feelings of success” (Epstein et al., 2009, p. 11). Additionally, communities were tasked with involving families, and vice versa, using wrap-around services for students such as before and after school care, in-school dental and medical services, and events that “reinforce, recognize, and reward students for good progress, creativity, contributions and excellence” (Epstein, 2010). Such family-friendly services and events took into account the needs of families and children, the willing parties were then able to develop “learning communities or caring communities” (Epstein, 1987; Epstein, 2010).

The Family School Partnerships Framework (Epstein, 1987) became the lens by which to explore and understand how teachers made sense of their experiences engaging with families in home school partnerships. Epstein (1987, 2013) provided a base concept showing the overlap that might occur when teachers made significant efforts to partner with families and the push and pull that is required of teachers and families. However, it is up to the teachers to create what such partnerships look, feel and act like. Using Epstein’s (1987) framework and teachers’ personal stories this study focused on how teachers made sense of their experiences.

The next chapter provides a literature review highlighting the history of the preschool system, the importance of preschool education, and the importance of home school partnerships. Finally, the literature review highlights the schools’ role in such partnerships, specifically what we know about how teachers make sense of their experiences engaging with families in partnerships.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review that follows focused on many aspects of preschool including the history of preschool, its importance, especially for urban students, and federally mandated preschool for students with disabilities. Additional considerations were given to the nature and importance of home school partnerships and the teacher’s role in home-school partnerships, including current studies highlighting teachers’ perceptions of their role in building relationship and preschool-family interactions and home attitudes toward family engagement in the pre-k academic foundation. An understanding of the impact of preschool on educational and economic outcomes as well as contributing factors toward student achievements and possible gaps was also examined (Education for All, 2008; Schweinhart, 2002; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Some studies argued that certain issues, such as economic or racial divides, caused barriers to mutual engagement between teachers and parents (Benson & Martin, 2003; Cole, 2008; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005). Of particular importance, the review spotlighted the home school partnership as it pertained to students in lower-income urban settings and the element of achievement perceived through a stronger home-school alliance in preschool urban areas (Duncan, 2015; van Voorhis et al., 2013).

History of Preschool Education

The history of preschool is quite extensive as it comprises hundreds of years, transverses over many continents, and includes dozens of theorists. As early as the ancient Romans, the benefits of immersing children at an early age in the learning process showed positive results (van Kleeck & Sheule, 2010). In the 1890s, home-based preschools became prevalent in Wisconsin where German immigrants sought to keep old-world traditions alive (Beatty, 1995; Morgan, 2011). Early 1900s educational enterprises included theorists such as John Dewey and Maria Montessori, as well as settlement houses meant to offer social services to tenement
residents (Morgan, 2011). Other private endeavors grew rapidly in number; however, the Great Depression caused Americans to rethink schooling, and many declared early schooling experiences as expendable because it was least likely to produce a return on investment (Morgan, 2011). During World War II, Congress expanded center-based initiatives as a way to aid women working in factories. It was from these efforts that state-funded preschools developed more fully (Beatty, 1995; Morgan, 2011).

Academic-based preschool education in the United States began slowly in the 1960s during a time of national upheaval and change (Rose, 2010). Civil Rights demonstrators marched through the country demanding equality in all facets of life, including education. President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “war on poverty” was directly affected by these social movements, which also insisted on racial and economic equality. The social movements of the 1960s also heavily influenced the ways in which scholars and practitioners viewed the government’s role in the lives of its citizens (Rose, 2010). A concept that heavily influenced government policy and, by proxy, the birth of programs such as Head Start and public preschool was the New Public Administration (NPA) which promised to cleanse outdated systems, including educational bureaucratic roadblocks for equal educational opportunities for all (Woods, 2006). The NPA proposed several strategies to achieve its social goals; however, it was unable to tackle the issue of pre-K educational parity as “as a right, not a privilege” (Duncan, 2015). Clearly, the idea that education should lay the foundation for uniformity in education and serve as a vehicle for economic and racial equity held considerable political weight (O’Leary, Slyke, & Kim, 2010).

Created in 1965, Head Start began as a summer program targeted at serving low-income three- and four-year-old children (Rose, 2010). The organization not only provided low-income families with childcare but also with education services. As the program took hold, Head Start
created an early intervention initiative for children from birth to age five whose families fell below the federal poverty line (Morgan, 2011). This program was meant to better prepare economically disadvantaged children for entry into school by equipping eligible children and their families with access to educational and comprehensive health services (Rose, 2010; Alford, 2009).

Since that time, Head Start has become one of the most prominent models for educating young children in the United States providing food and health, education, and social services to low-income students (Rose, 2010). Enrollment increased from 561,000 children in 1965 to 927,275 children in 2014, an increase of 62 percent, while expenditures increased from just over $560 million in 2003 dollars to $8.6 billion over the same time span - an increase of almost 1,300 percent (Alford, 2009; Head Start, 2015). In light of government and other studies such as the Carolina Abecedarian Initiative and the Perry Preschool Program, Head Start initiatives evolved from inception to the current trend in home-school focused cooperatives. This changed the dynamics of the curricula and invested time and money into establishing the much-needed home-school partnership which was shown to escalate student achievement and was more likely to be maintained throughout the child’s school career (Drang, 2011; Merrill, 2015).

One final consideration is the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Act (MADOE, 2006) which mandated preschool for any child aged three to five with special needs. These special needs are described as “one or more of the disabilities enumerated in IDEA” as well as any student determined to have a developmental delay (Boylan & Goldman, 2010, p. 3). The law goes on to say that students be taught in the least restrictive environment and surrounded by same aged general education peers who serve as models for the children with disabilities.
Specifically, Massachusetts State approved preschool program standards show the importance of inclusion for students with disabilities in “all program activities with their peers and the need to adapt the environment, materials, and curriculum to meet children’s individual needs” (MA DOE, 2003, p. 5). However, the state standards fall short of including students of poverty or those who are not native English speakers as well as those with disabilities, perhaps doing a disservice to both populations and leading to a continued gap in achievement.

A major flaw of government involvement in early childhood education was public funding and educational services for these youngest regular education students were not linked to policy; however, with the advancing interest and concern for early education, this lack of central policy is undergoing drastic revision (Duncan, 2015; van Voorhis et al., 2013). If the newly proposed Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Act passes through Congressional vote, all pre-k educational packages will see rapid transformation of their established goals and objectives (Duncan, 2015). A major and significant overhaul will directly affect family-school collaboration and the preschool teacher’s role in adapting these changes to more specific and appropriate curricula, including the addition of mandates for family-school partnership and strategies to include all families in school community efforts (Duncan, 2015; van Voorhis et al., 2013).

**Importance of Preschool Education**

In general terms, preschool is the first foray into education for many three and four year old children. Recent data show that four percent of three year old, and twenty-nine percent of four year old children in the United States were enrolled in a preschool program during the 2013-2014 school year (Barnett et al., 2015). This translates into slightly more than 1.3 million children afforded the opportunity to gain valuable academic and civic skills prior to entering
kindergarten and beyond. In a safe environment surrounded by peers and supportive staff, young children may learn early reading and math skills as well as the socialization and citizenship concepts needed to be successful throughout their educational career. Numerous studies (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000; Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010; Heckman, Moon, Rodrigo, Savelyev, & Yavitz, 2010; Yoshikawa et al., 2013) have shown substantial growth for children who attend preschool versus those who do not.

According to a study produced by Yoshikawa et al., (2013), the importance of preschool for all children cannot be ignored. Scientific evidence proves that “large scale public preschool programs can have substantial impacts on children’s early learning” (p. 1) and “a second year of preschool shows additional benefits” (p. 2). When comparing programs such as Perry Preschool and Abecedarian with more recent programs in Tulsa and Boston, evidence shows that math and reading gains of up to a year were found in students who participated in preschool (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Children who attend preschool tend to show a long-term cost-benefit of three to seven dollars saved for every dollar spent according to Yoshikawa et al (2013) and possibly as much as 12 dollars per dollar spent according to Heckman et al. (2010) proving that quality preschool education is a profitable and worthy investment. Children who attend preschool are less likely to need special education; they commit fewer crimes, and have better social skills. Pre-emptive cost measures make sense and add to the importance of preschool for all children (Duncan, 2015; Office of the Press Secretary, 2013; Yoshikawa, 2013). Additionally, students who attend preschool are more likely to achieve higher lifetime earnings (Heckman et al., 2010).

A quality preschool is comprised of many things, but most important are “stimulating and supportive interactions between teachers and children and effective use of curricula” (Yoshikawa et al., 2013, p. 1). Children who attend preschool benefit when they are able to investigate their
surroundings and can learn through interactions with peers and teachers who support them. Teachers act as guides to support the learning by asking important questions. To achieve this, teachers must have appropriate curriculum and know how to use it.

Having a good curriculum is important, but that curriculum becomes useless if teachers are not supported “in their implementation of instructional approaches through coaching or mentoring” (Yoshikawa et al., 2013, p.1). Mentors can provide valuable feedback that helps teachers improve their interactions with students, make sure the appropriate centers are set up, and ask the appropriate questions to enhance learning. Lastly, studies show that low-income students may begin school twelve to fourteen months behind their peers (Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). While quality preschool education benefits all children, studies demonstrate that those from “low-income backgrounds benefit more” (Yoshikawa et al, 2013, p. 2). Equally important, low-income children who participate in preschool raise literacy, language, and math outcomes (Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). For these reasons preschool is important; however, for students who reside in urban and low-income areas, preschool is vital.

**Importance of Preschool in the Urban Setting**

Urban areas and poverty tend to go hand in hand as described by Jiang, Ekono and Skinner (2015). The report revealed that during the 2012-2013 school year, 23 percent of children under 18 years of age lived in poverty; among children six and under, 24 million lived in low-income or poor families, and many lived in large urban areas. This translated to 48% low-income and 25% poor families whose parental education level and/or employment, as well as race/ethnicity, influenced the child’s ability to attain academic success in school. In one school, 14 of 18 kindergarteners were classified as eligible for free lunch (Layton, 2015). These children and their families, called the majority poor, rarely achieved the success of their peers according
to a study by the Southern Education Foundation (2015) primarily because they were “less likely to have support at home, less frequently exposed to enriching activities…and are more likely to drop out and never attend college” (Suitts, 2015).

Several studies found that parent and community partnerships in all programs inclusive of Head Start added to a child’s overall development (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Epstein, 2013; Harvard Family Research Project, 2014; Haskins & Rouse, 2005). One variable that is missing from these discussions, however, is the urban children whose families are the least privileged economically, come from non-English speaking backgrounds, and have little or no educational background themselves (Harvard Family Research Project, 2014; Office of the Education Ombudsmen, 2012; Wight, Chau, & Aratani, 2010). A definitive omission, the significance of considering individuals from these ethnically related backgrounds deserves attention.

Children whose parents speak little or no English begin school with a definite disadvantage, as they are less likely to be foundationally grounded in English, the language of American education (Wight et al., 2010). While there may not be inherent differences between children of different nationalities and socio-economic backgrounds, the cultures that children are socialized into can have a distinct impact on how they learn and communicate in the early years (Wight et al., 2010). Without knowing how to properly communicate and relate to a variety of students from diverse backgrounds, a facilitator in an educational setting may not be able to impact children or have the effect needed to bring about significant change in attitudes toward learning or future success (van Roekel, 2008; Wight et al., 2010). Many professionals and policymakers argue that early childhood education has the potential to address learning and developmental issues facing American children before they reach the age of 5. (Duncan et al., 2007; Yoshikawa et al, 2013). Other pundits (Barnett 2007; Barnett & Masse 2007; Heckman
2007; Heckman et al, 2010) argue that early childhood educational settings can be used as strategies to address economic and social issues. Both views hold valid points, and it is important to evaluate and integrate developmental, educational, economic, and social issues when discussing the importance of preschool.

**Preschool Studies**

Camilli et al. (2010) used meta-analysis to show that enrollment in pre-k programs has a positive effect on learning and child development. In Camilli et al. (2010), they revealed the positive effect to be equivalent to almost seven points on an IQ scale. Aos, Lieb, Mayfield, Miller & Pennucci (2004) found that there were higher graduation rates and lower special education and grade repetition rates for children with access to pre-k education. However, these positive effects declined as students moved away from preschool into higher grades (Alford, 2009). While studies vary in scope, most show that children who experience the most positive results are those enrolled in programs focused on educational development (Duncan, 2015; Merrill, 2015). The long-term value of preschool education is still under consideration but is moving toward a positive outlook and response to set curricula and home school collaborations is growing (Alford, 2009; Duncan, 2015; Merrill, 2015).

**Georgia and North Carolina studies.** In 1993, Georgia introduced a universal preschool package to include all children, not merely the economically disadvantaged (Barnett & Hustedt, 2003). North Carolina began a program in 1993 called Smart Start. The course began small but is now a state-wide initiative. Research showed that students in these schools were better prepared to enter regular school than those children not acclimated to a school environment until age five (Barnett & Hustedt, 2003; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2002; Washington, 2005). The National Institute of Child Health and
Human Development studied the impact of early child education to determine the positive and negative effects of PK schooling. This body of research found that various curricula had encouraging impact on the linguistic, cognitive, and social skills of students, which has been substantiated by several more recent studies and government proposals (Duncan, 2015; van Voorhis et al., 2013, Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013).

**Head Start study.** In Tulsa, Oklahoma, researchers conducted a rigorous quasi-experimental study on the initial effects of Head Start (Gormley, Phillips, & Gayer, 2008). Teachers in that particular study had four-year college degrees, early childhood teacher certification, and salaries/benefits on par with public school educators (Gormley et al., 2008). Literacy and math impacts were considerably larger than those in other similarly conducted research, including comparable estimates from the NIS study (Puma et al., 2005; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Non-experimental studies that reduced or eliminated selection bias were used to determine the impact Head Start has on enrolled students (Gormley et al., 2008). The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of Kindergarten Children is one of the non-experimental studies that determined Head Start produced positive effects on achievement, with the estimates of initial impacts similar to those from the randomized trials noted earlier (McGilly, 2009). While the study did not find long-lasting effects for African-American students, there were long-lasting effects on those measures for white and Hispanic children. Similar results continue to be found with a new longitudinal study launched in 2011 (McGilly, 2009).

Ludwig and Miller (2007) noted that Head Start decreased mortality for children between ages five and nine. It is plausible that the positive results found in the study were affected by the agency’s health services. The study also found advantages associated with increased high school graduation rates and college attendance (Ludwig & Miller, 2007). Initiatives that were more
educationally intensive have their outcomes more closely tied to the kind of inputs being offered, whether access to dental care or learning letters, they indicate a stronger, more tangible impact on children and families. Studies such as High/Scope Perry (Schweinhart et al., 2005) and Tulsa Pre-K (Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005), New York and South Carolina (Aos et al., 2004; Barnett, 2008; Gilliam & Zigler, 2001), as well as Chicago (Reynolds, 2000) all showed additional benefits afforded to preschool students.

**Longitudinal Studies**

The High/Scope Perry Preschool study and the Tulsa Pre-K study are exceptional early education studies because of their well-designed, longitudinal research that implemented random trials (Besharov, Germanis, Higney & Call, 2011). The research is significant not only because of the methodology used to carry out the research, but also because of the higher-than-usual implementation standard of the programs. Examining these studies demonstrates what preschools operating at their highest level can produce. Both the Perry and Tulsa preschool programs hired public school teachers who received advanced training and mentorship to educate children in their developmental years (Bryant et al., 2003; Camilli et al., 2010). Other preschool agendas with strong evidence of effectiveness have had similar support for instructors. Several pundits (Frede, 1998; McGilly, 2011; Weiss et al., 2009) have maintained that strong teacher support is crucial to driving positive educational outcomes.

**High/Scope Perry Preschool study.** The High/Scope Perry Preschool was an experimental study that used random assignments to place 128 economically disadvantaged minority children in either a half-day preschool with home visits by the teachers or a control group with no preschool (Schweinhart et al., 2005). Children attended the preschool for two years beginning at age three, with a small group of four-year-old students included in the study.
The student-to-teacher ratio was more ideal than typical public programs: six or seven children to each instructor. The staffing expenses incurred by the Perry study were more than the typically state-funded pre-k situations. The black/white and poor/non-poor test score gaps found at school entry were negated after two years by the initial positive effects on broad cognitive abilities for the children attending the Perry Preschool (Schweinhart et al., 2005). There was no continual impact on IQ; however, the positive effects on achievement tests were substantial and continued through school. The impact on reading at age 14 and age 19 closed the achievement gap by 40 percent (Schweinhart et al., 2005).

**Tulsa Pre-K study.** The study of universal PK in Tulsa, Oklahoma, showed substantial positive effects on math and literacy test scores at kindergarten entry (Gormley et al., 2008; Gormley et al., 2005). While, the positive effects were seen across socio-economic, gender, and ethnic backgrounds, the positive impacts of the programs were greater for children of color (Gormley et al., 2005; Gormley et al., 2008). Among the notable features of the Tulsa PK were the teacher qualifications and the educational focus. In Tulsa, both public school PK and Head Start classrooms employed fully qualified public school teachers who receive equivalent public school salaries. The literacy advances of Tulsa’s public PK were almost twice those of Tulsa Head Start, reflecting the use of a standard literacy curriculum accompanied by focused professional development. The math effects for the two programs were almost identical.

Many studies have estimated the impact of universal preschool on children from privileged families to determine whether children from all socioeconomic backgrounds experience positive results. The large sample taken in the Tulsa study allowed researchers to examine results for children who qualify for free lunch or reduced-price lunch, and children whose families live above the poverty line. The Tulsa study found positive effects for all three-
income groups. Rigorous non-experimental studies on the impact of preschool are the best method for determining the large scale, long-term effects of state and local programs. When comparing experimental and non-experimental studies, it is apparent that less-rigorous research models may have underestimated the initial effects of PK, sometimes by as much as 50 percent (Camilli et al., 2010; Frede, Jung, Barnett, Lamy, & Figueras, 2007). The most rigorous non-experimental studies found that continual effects persist through second grade; however, the effects may later dissipate (Alford, 2009; Frede et al., 2007).

**New York, South Carolina and Chicago Preschool studies.** Evaluations of both New York’s and South Carolina’s preschools provided two methodologically strong state evaluations. These studies showed that positive effects on pupils’ cognitive abilities continued into elementary school (Aos et al., 2004; Barnett, 2008; Gilliam & Zigler, 2001). Additionally, retention in higher grades was a result of the preschool program in the New York study. The studies showed a mixed pattern of positive and null findings on achievement tests while a uniform pattern of significant reductions in special education and grade retention was found from the quasi-experimental methods studies (Aos et al., 2004; Barnett, 1998; Gilliam & Zigler, 2001).

The Child Parent Center (CPC) study conducted the most comprehensive long-term research of large-scale public preschool (Reynolds, 2000). The CPC program was operated by Chicago public schools beginning in the late 1960s. The CPC provided socio-economically disadvantaged students with a half-day preschool and kindergarten, and a follow-up elementary school component. Slightly more than half of CPC students attended the program for two years beginning at age three. The remaining students attended the preschool for one year beginning at age four. The teacher was licensed and had an assistant in each classroom. There were 18
children in each classroom, so the student/instructor ratio was one to nine (Reynolds, 2000). The staffing, qualifications, number of hours enrolled, educational focus and cost of the program matched the fundamental basic designs of the best state courses. The students enrolled in the program had above-average test score upon entering kindergarten (Reynolds, 2000). These above average test scores are indicators of future success in school and beyond (Reynolds et al., 2001).

**Economic Analysis of the Effects of Preschool.** The Perry Preschool (Schweinhart et al., 2005), Abecedarian (Barnett & Masse, 2007), and Chicago CPC (Temple & Reynolds, 2007) studies provided sufficient methodological rigor, breadth of measurement, and length of follow-up to support comprehensive benefit-cost analyses that compared the economic value of investing in preschools. All the studies determined that although some of the program effects were modest, the return on investment greatly exceeds costs. Each of the three studies suggested that preschool programs are a sound use of public funds with a cost-benefit savings of between three to seven dollars saved for every one dollar spent (Heckman et al., 2010; Reynolds et al., 2011; Yoshikawa et al, 2013).

Subsequent schooling costs and increases in adult earnings provided important economic benefits. Such findings indicated that there may be reduced needs for special education interventions and grade repetition (Barnett, 2008; Gilliam & Zigler; 2001Heckman et al, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2001). Crime and delinquency were substantially reduced as a result of the preschool attendance (Yoshikawa et al, 2013). Additionally, the Abecedarian and Perry Preschool studies found evidence that preschool attendance reduced smoking and risky sexual behavior in the later teen years (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Results seemed to indicate that the Perry and Chicago CPC programs reduced the advent of criminal behavior in older children who attended preschool (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). There was no reduction in crime found in the
Abecedarian attendees (Barnett & Masse, 2007). Population and neighborhood differences may explain the separate outcomes. The studies indicated that curriculum is important for a program’s effect on socio-emotional development and self-control (Barnett et al., 2008; Schweinhart, Weikart & Larner, 1986; Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

It is worth noting that all three programs served disadvantaged children. While PK institutions have different impacts on diverse populations, there is no evidence to suggest that programs serving more socio-economically advantaged youth would not pass a benefit-cost test. According to Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, and Thornburg (2009, p. 50),

Children from lower-income families tend to gain more from a good preschool education than more advantaged children. However, the educational achievement gains for non-disadvantaged children are substantial, perhaps 75% as large as the gains for low income children.

There is no evidence that average programs produce the same types of results as the best preschools. However, equipping teachers with mentorship and coaching that help them effectively communicate and target the skill levels of their students using effective curricula results in dynamic results for students (Pianta et al., 2009; Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

Overall, preschool programs appear in a positive light with the advantages proving to be important equalizers for lower-income children. Educationally focused programs, such as Head Start and higher-quality preschools linked to public education, tend to have more long-term positive effects than typical childcare, which has considerably smaller short- and long-term effects. Preschool programs, however, also require a connection to the families they serve. These partnerships have the ability to enhance or diminish the gains that may be made (Epstein, 2013).
Research reveals that urban children enrolled in an early childhood education program have a greater chance for future success in school and after graduation (Duncan, 2015; Harvard Family Research Project, 2014; Office of the Education Ombudsmen, 2012). The rationale is two-fold: first, the opportunity exists to enrich a child’s life with a solid educational foundation prior to entering the standard schooling from kindergarten to graduation; secondly, the positive and long-lasting effects engendered via a home-school relationship gives children the intrinsic knowledge that education is a significant and vital aspect of growing up and future success (Alford, 2009; Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Camilli et al., 2010). Urban children, especially those coming from underprivileged families, have added burdens when striving for success, and these children have been particularly targeted in Duncan’s ESEA proposal to Congress that specifically targets home school partnerships (Duncan, 2015, Wight et al., 2010).

**Nature and Importance of Home School Partnerships**

The preschool movement was borne out of the necessity to provide both early childcare and education for families at or below the poverty line. These initial standards were considered proactive for child development; that ideology has since been obscured in more recent studies that demonstrate that the greatest impact lies in the need for teacher family cooperation (Camilli et al., 2010; Epstein, 2013; Grant & Ray, 2013). These studies were built upon Epstein’s original thesis of parental involvement in their children’s education (Epstein, 1987; Epstein, 1995; Epstein et al., 2002).

Studies suggested that teachers make home visits with particular emphasis toward students whose family background was well-below the poverty line, whose families were challenged with language barriers, and/or whose parents lacked the training to extend home learning (Harvard, 2014; van Voorhis et al., 2013; Wight et al., 2010). A variety of pundits
(Grant & Ray, 2013; Hynes, 2014; National Education Association, 2012) suggested making visits to all families regardless of income level as a way to extend the connections between home and school. While home visits were not the only way to partner with families, they did seem to be the most prevalent and visible way to make connections. These home visits were especially important in urban areas where meeting families more than halfway was a necessity.

Home School Partnerships

The effectiveness of educational partnerships and specifically preschool programs depends on how schools and families engage or partner with each other. For many years, the terms family involvement and family engagement were interchangeable, however they denote two very different manners for schools and families to become engaged in the educational process. “To involve” is defined as “to enfold or envelop” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2015). This suggests that families are asked to do something to others that in turn helps student success. In contrast, “to engage” is defined as “to do or take part in something, to come together” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2015). This entails that families are asked to do something with others to help provide for student success. The prime difference between involve and engage is that “involvement implies doing to; while engage implies doing with” (Ferlazzo, 2011, p. 11).

Family engagement has been a tenet of both Federal and State legislation since 1965 with Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). In 2002, the NCLB Act reenergized the 1965 ESEA Act and, most recently, with the latest innovation as given to Congress by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. In particular, this version required a massive annual budget increase to include all children in preschool education, not merely those below or at the poverty line or children whose families could afford private preschools. This new version by the U.S. Department of Education (2015) was designed to include all children and
incorporates budgetary spending meant to directly involve parents and families, whether foster or natural, along with schools and teachers (Duncan, 2015). It adds to the reflections and mandates of the 2010 ESEA reenergized mandate that states the “importance of strengthening and supporting family engagement both through specific programs designed to involve families and communities and thorough policies that will engage and empower parents” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 1) and further states that educational leaders and teachers have the responsibility “to include families in the educational process” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p.1).

Early education programs should attempt to learn about the families for whom they work, especially the culture of their families. Understanding cultural ideas about diet, health, and other basic family data must be understood so that the school community can provide appropriate services to fulfill the needs of students (Lipson & Dibble, 2005). Though families may retain their cultural backgrounds and experiences, school enhances cultural exchanges that may separate generations within a family, often creating a better understanding between home and school as families’ grapple with the new cultural and social experiences of their children (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Ovando & Collier, 1998; van Roekel, 2008).

The values, attitudes and beliefs of parents regarding education have a direct impact on student academic performance (Epstein, 2011; Grant & Ray, 2013; Harvard, 2014; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Schools cannot adequately address the needs of their most disadvantaged pupils without contributions from their families. Redefining family engagement means creating integrated community-wide programs to help children succeed. The expanded definition of family engagement rests on research showing how parents play significant roles in supporting their children’s learning not only in the home, but also by guiding their children successfully
through complex school systems and becoming vocal advocates for their children and for effective public school experiences through shared experiences (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Epstein, 2011; Flamboyan Classroom Family Engagement Rubric, 2011, Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

One of the feature components of shared responsibility was teacher communication to family members, addressing ways in which these individuals could contribute to their child’s educational success. Shared responsibility goes beyond just asking family members to participate; it consists of mutually agreed-upon roles for family members and schools (Epstein, 2011; Map & Kuttner, 2014; van Roekel, 2008). The roles of these partnerships vary as superintendents and other administrators set the tone in their respective districts (Brandt, 1989; Epstein, 2011). A final element of shared responsibility is that, regardless of resources, every family can do something to contribute to the success of their children with the caveat that although this is theoretically possible, the idea of mutual willingness falls into the mix, therefore inhibiting contributions to a child’s academic success (Hynes, 2014).

Research indicates that parents have an influential role in the development of their children’s academic achievement from birth to adulthood (Epstein, 2011; Fuller, Kagan, Caspary, & Gauthier, 2002; Hynes, 2014). In early childhood, parents play a major role in the development of children’s cognitive and language skills. Parent’s supervisory role and goals of promoting literacy are shown to have an impact on achievement. During the middle and high school years, parents help their children by fostering educational socialization and helping them prepare for future college and career achievement, which in totality enhances the idea of family engagement throughout a child’s academic career (Fuller et al., 2002; Hynes, 2014; Office of the Education Ombudsmen, 2012).
Family engagement is not limited to parents’ helping their children at home. Family engagement means involvement with any endeavour such as faith-based, community, or afterschool programs (Office of the Education Ombudsmen, 2012). Parents play a major role in determining whether their children take advantage of all the educational opportunities available to them in the community. However, this cannot be accomplished without the cooperative efforts of teachers and, in this instance, preschool teachers, as suggested by Drang (2011) in her in-depth doctoral research regarding the phenomenon of pre-k teachers and their attitudinal perceptions of home school mutuality.

Family engagement therefore, is an important component to ensure collaboration between home and school or caregivers and educators for the purpose of increasing academic success for students. Grant and Ray (2013) echo Epstein et al. (2002) in this vein, explaining that family engagement requires “a mutually collaborative, working relationship with the family [that] serves the best interests of the student, in both school and home settings, for the primary purpose of increasing student achievement” (p. 6). It is incumbent on the school to provide ongoing and positive ways in which to engage with families. “The school must nurture relationships with all families and then give them the tools to participate in their children’s education” (Constantino, 2008, p. 1). The meaning is quite explicit, family engagement has a multitude of facets that must be addressed in order for there to be attainable academic success for all students; in particular, the urban preschool student and the urban teacher play an important role in this success.

**Teacher’s role in parent partnership**

It was noted that while quite a bit of work was done to educate parents on effective ways to engage with their children’s schools and teachers, very little was done in the last three decades in training educators to use effective strategies in engaging parents with schools (Epstein, 2013;
Meyer & Mann, 2006). Joyce Epstein, one of the seminal experts on family-school partnerships, provided a comprehensive model to help parents become involved with schools and foster improved educational outcomes for their children. The six types or “keys” (Epstein, 2011; Grant & Ray, 2013) provide the necessary framework for phenomenal interactions between school and family. Different from Epstein’s (1987) theoretical framework, these keys lay the groundwork for the partnership between family and school; rather than explaining the “why” (i.e. theoretical framework), the six keys explain the “how” (i.e. partnerships) (Grant & Ray, 2013).

Figure 2. Keys to Successful Partnerships: Six Types of Involvement (Epstein, 2009).

Epstein’s (1987, 2011) work provided the keys for parental engagement in the educational process: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-
making, and collaborating with community. In this framework, educators made efforts to equip parents with the tools to help children develop academically when away from school. These parameters included training for parent programs and other services to support the well-being of families (Epstein, 1987, 2011). The Keys also offer suggestions of what results might look like for students, families and teachers. Over time, Epstein expanded on her original work, which also gave opportunity to other scholars to develop ways in which family-school relationships could improve their partnerships (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Epstein, 2011; Harvard Family Research Project, 2014; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Merrill, 2015).

The Harvard Family Research Project (2014) study reemphasized Epstein’s philosophy of family school engagement for the furtherance of a child’s education. To put the onus solely on schools to meet students’ needs requires rigor on the part of teachers and other personnel that cannot be met simply because of the variations in today’s student community. Disadvantaged students require in-depth support not only in language but also in the basics of learning how to learn, often neglected in a disadvantaged home environment. These students need the “benefits of a complementary learning approach, in which an array of school and non-school supports complement one another to create an integrated set of community-wide resources that support learning and development from birth to young adulthood” (Harvard, 2014).

Similar to Epstein’s model, Mapp and Kuttner (2013) suggested A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships. Endorsed by Arne Duncan, the dual capacity-building framework acts as a “compass…to chart a path toward effective family engagement efforts that are linked to student achievement and school improvement” (p. 6) not a “blueprint for engagement initiatives” (p. 6). There are four parts to the compass that are
considered essential elements: the challenge, opportunity conditions, policy and program goals, and, lastly, family and staff capacity outcomes.

Challenge refers to the lack of opportunity by families, staff and school to build partnerships. Opportunity conditions are a broad term linked to process and organizational conditions. Process conditions refer to collaboration, interactivity, and linking knowledge to learning while organizational conditions are tied to systemic change, integrated change in all programs, and sustained change using resources. Within the policy and program goals, Mapp and Kuttner (2013) refer to the 4 C’s: capabilities (Skills and knowledge), connections (networks), cognition (values and beliefs), and confidence (self-efficacy). Lastly, family and staff capacity outcomes are two-fold. The school and staff are tasked with connecting family engagement to student learning, creating a welcoming school culture, and honoring family knowledge, while families are tasked with supporting, encouraging, advocating, and collaborating, which ultimately aid in student achievement and school culture (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Another connection teachers and staff used to meet families and build trusting, cooperative partnerships while attempting to close the achievement gap was community collaboration. Endorsed by the National Education Foundation (2013) and used in many states, the National Education Association (NEA) has provided assistance to form solid bonds with families. For example, in Springfield, Massachusetts, the Springfield Collaborative for Change (SCC) in conjunction with the NEA has provided techniques for collaboration between school and home. This led to the realization that “collaboration is difficult… and requires both that people be given an opportunity to participate and that they believe they can participate in an open and honest way” (NEA, 2013, p. 9).
A home visit program also became a catalyst for change and collaboration. Used across the country in a variety of ways, home visits provided an opportunity for families and teachers to get to know each other in the families own comfortable surroundings. Also endorsed by the NEA (2012), the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project (PTHVP) of Sacramento, CA is an “investment in teacher effectiveness and enriched student learning” because the families, students and teachers “come together through home visits to change educational outcomes for the better” (NEA, 2012, p. 2). This voluntary program provided visit to all families regardless of student achievement level and/or behavior multiple times over the year and throughout the students’ academic career. This program concentrated on a co-educator approach where the parent is half of the collaboration equation. It is important to note that teachers were compensated for their after-hours work with families; however, the benefits far outweigh the time and money spent. This program is currently used in some Springfield, Massachusetts, public elementary and preschools programs and is being expanded during the 2015-2016 school year to include all preschool and elementary schools. However, with money in public schools at a premium, there is little financial backing and, because it is voluntary, many teachers see this program as an additional burden.

**What we know about how teachers make sense of their experience**

Teachers play a major role in the level of parental engagement that their students receive (Epstein, 2011; Griffith, 1998; Harvard Family Research Project, 2014; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The role of teachers can be either direct, for example, when asking parents to volunteer at school. Their role can also be indirect, suggesting ways in which parents can help their children at home (Griffith, 1998). Research indicates that when teachers interact with parents, the parental engagement increases (Epstein, 2011; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).
Meyer, Mann, and Becker (2011) conducted a small survey that examined 29 teachers and their beliefs regarding partnering with families through home visits. Eighty-two percent of the teachers (24/29) believed that the home visit had been helpful in understanding families better. Of that same group, fifty-five percent (16/29) agreed that the home visit created a more positive, open line of communication with families and fifty-one percent (15/29) felt that parents would be more willing to contact the teacher because of the personal visit. It should be noted that these same teachers expressed frustration in families who avoided meeting with teachers, were not home when teachers went to visit, or had moved and not told the teachers (Meyer et al., 2011). Other teachers felt there were additional barriers to parental engagement, such as the time that it takes to implement parent activities, rituals, and procedures (Chavkin & Williams, 2001; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Gary & Witherspoon, 2011). Overall, the limited feedback given by teachers to Meyer et al. (2011) was more positive than negative in terms of partnering with families. With such limited feedback from teachers regarding how they make sense of their experiences engaging in home school connections, it is necessary to interview teachers and understand their experiences.
Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of the study was to understand how teachers make sense of their experiences engaging in home-school partnerships. As the focus was on participant’s experiences and perceptions, qualitative methodology was selected. The following overarching research question guided this study:

How do eight teachers at an urban public preschool make sense of their experience engaging in home-school partnerships within an integrated classroom setting?

Qualitative Research

Given that the focus of this study was on teachers’ experiences and perceptions, qualitative research was the most appropriate method of investigation. Creswell (2012b) suggests qualitative research gives meaning to a social or human problem to be explored. This pundit continues by explaining that in qualitative research there needs to be a “complex, detailed understanding of the issue” that “can only be established by talking directly with the people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered” (Creswell, 2013b, p. 48).

Paradigm- Constructivism-Interpretivism

At its most basic level, a paradigm “sets the context of an investigator’s study” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128). A paradigm has several facets that give the research dimension and substance focusing on reality as perceived by the individual or how the researcher seeks to interpret the meanings that the participants have about the world around them (Ponterotto, 2005). It is necessary for the researcher to include all facets of the lived experience when investigating a problem of practice.
Otonology concerns itself with understanding the reality of the problem of practice. From the constructivism paradigm, reality is subjective and understood though each participant’s own viewpoint and experience. To understand this reality, the researcher interviewed fewer participants but wrote “thick descriptions” to explain the lived experience, neither finding a single truth nor searching for verification (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 130). The relationship between the participants and the researcher is known as epistemology. This facet of the paradigm dictates that interactions between the two parties be intimate and intense. A shared understanding helped the researcher “reach deeper insights into the lived experience” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131).

The third facet of the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm is axiology that concerns itself with the scientific process. Due to the personal nature of the research and the time spent with the participants, it was difficult to separate myself from potential biases. Ponterotto (2005) suggests that the researcher should “acknowledge, describe and bracket” his or her values, but not eliminate them (p. 131). These biases help the researcher connect with the participants and increase the lived experience dialogue that is gleaned from the participant.

The language used to present the research was the rhetorical structure facet. When viewed through the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm, this included the experience of the researcher as well as the participants. The researcher reflected on the process and research, and included this reflection in the writing process. The rhetorical structure and the methodology, the last two facets of the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm, provided the dimension and substance needed to present the procedures and results of the study. The language (or rhetoric) framed the experience of the researcher as well as the participants. The researcher reflected on the process and research and included this reflection in the writing process. When all facets of
the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm were brought together and looked at in totality, it was easy to understand the paradigm. This paradigm was the lens from which to view the study.

**Research Approach**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the methodology chosen for this study. IPA is detail oriented, providing a comprehensive examination of the participant and focusing on the “meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for participants” or how the participant makes sense of their experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53). Also of importance is the dynamic role the researcher plays in the research itself, attempting to become part of the participant’s inside world in order to better understand that world from the participant’s viewpoint. Smith and Osborn (2008) perhaps state it best, “The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (p. 53).

Jonathan Smith, a professor in the Department of Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London, first established IPA in 1996. IPA has crossed over from a tradition utilized primarily in psychology to one used in the social science disciplines as well (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Based on the experiences of its participants and the meanings the participants derive from those experiences, IPA provides rich and detailed stories from which to explain explicit life experiences.

**Historical Roots.** Two philosophers influenced the birth of interpretative phenomenological analysis. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) introduced phenomenology. Husserl’s focus was in finding meaning in one’s own experience from the inside out, using reflection as a method of understanding at the moment of occurrence (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl believed there was a correlation between experiencing and that which is experienced, and as a participant
in that experience essential qualities were identifiable upon reflection (Smith et al., 2009). As a philosopher, Husserl was concerned with the essence of the experience, whereas a psychologist would naturally be concerned with others’ experiences. It was this difference in perception that first influenced phenomenology (Husserl, 1913).

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) began as a student of Husserl and later modified Husserl’s work. Heidegger was concerned with the relationships and daily activities of humans, and their connections with the existence itself (Heidegger, 1962). Central to Heidegger’s view of phenomenology were three concepts: being-in-the-world, person-in-context, and intersubjectivity. Being-in-the-world refers to one’s perception, awareness, and consciousness. Person-in-context refers to connection between the person and the experience while intersubjectivity refers to the “shared, overlapping and relational nature of our engagement in the world” (Heidegger, 1962). These three ideas, more than any others, shaped Heidegger’s viewpoint of phenomenology, most specifically through the lens of hermeneutics, and consequently influenced IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

**Hermeneutics.** The second underpinning of interpretative phenomenological analysis is hermeneutics or the theory of interpretation (Moustakas, 1994). Originally used to provide a stable context for understanding biblical and historical documents, hermeneutics asks the reader or researcher to search for an author’s original meaning. According to Moustakas (1994), the hermeneutic process is the manifestation of textual meaning where hidden phenomena are uncovered. Interpretation “will focus on the meaning of the text and that meaning will be strongly influenced by the moment at which the interpretation is made” (Gadamer, 1990/1960).

This reflective process required a four-point process focused on (a) fixation of the meaning, (b) dissociation by the author, (c) interpretation of the text in its entirety, and (d) the
understanding that multiple meanings of the text may exist (Moustakas, 1994). As previously noted, through this process the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant’s world while the participant is trying to make sense of his own world (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The concept of the hermeneutic circle is helpful in pulling together the “dynamic relationship between the part and the whole…To look at any given part, you look to the whole, to understand the whole, you look to the parts” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28).

**Idiography.** The third and final underpinning of interpretive phenomenological analysis is idiography or the concern of the particular (Moustakas, 1994). This concern for the particular, one particular viewpoint, event, or relationship, means that the researcher must move between two levels of analysis. The first is a commitment to the analysis of the particular in regard to detail. The second is an understanding of how the particular informs or is understood by another perspective, that of the participant (Moustakas, 1994). It is important to remember that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, or IPA, does not just attempt to understand the lived experience (that is general phenomenology); rather, IPA understands how individuals make sense of their experience.

**Participants.** A purposeful sampling was used to identify participants. Purposeful sampling refers to specific preselected criteria the researcher uses to choose participants who are best matched to meet the needs of the study. In the case of this study, a purposeful sampling of eight to preschool teachers who were from the same urban public school in western Massachusetts were recruited. The criteria used to identify participants included (a) state licensure by the state of Massachusetts, (b) teachers must have held a preliminary, initial or professional license, which is designated by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MDESE] (2015), Early Childhood: Teacher of Students with and without
disabilities (PreK-2) (Department of Education, 2015); and (c) teachers worked at one specifically identified public, urban preschool in Massachusetts.

**Research site.** The research site chosen was an elementary school in western Massachusetts. The school housed grades K-5 as well as one of the largest preschool populations in the district. It is important to note that the district as a whole had been designated for free lunch, with this particular elementary school showing a free/reduced lunch rate of 93.1% in 2012 (Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, 2014). As further proof of an urban school, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission Report (2014) stated a climbing poverty rate of 33.3% and a crime rate of 55.9% per 1000 in 2012. Minority enrollment accounted for 92% of the students while the state average was 34% and of these 22.2% were enrolled as English Language Learners (ELL’s) (MDESE, 2015). Additional statistics showed this elementary school with 24.6% of the students having disabilities and, of the 790 students enrolled, 186 were preschoolers (MDESE, 2015). This public preschool setting, like all other public preschools in Massachusetts, was integrated with each classroom containing seven students with disabilities and eight peer model students.

**Recruitment and access.** Approval was requested for this study as required by the public school research protocols in the City of Springfield, Massachusetts, (see Appendix A) and the Northeastern University Internal Review Board. A letter was sent to the principal requesting access to the teachers (see Appendix B). The teachers who matched the aforementioned criteria were then sent individual letters (see Appendix C). Interested parties who responded to the initial request were contacted by the researcher via email or phone. This took place within a two-week period of time.

**Protection of human subjects.** All participants in this study were volunteers who understood the research to be conducted, and were free to terminate their interviews at any time.
Both the school and the participants were given pseudonyms prior to the start of the research. Participants were presented with, and asked to sign, an Informed Consent form (see Appendix D). All data, forms, signature pages, transcripts, emails, and other documents were kept on a password-protected cloud and eventually deleted providing no trail or evidence of the actual participants in the research study.

**Data Collection Method**

IPA data collection protocols dictated semi-structured interviews using questions (Appendix E) that were structured in such a way that participants were able to offer rich narrative responses describing how they made sense of their experiences engaging in home school partnerships. “Participants are the experts of their own experiences” (Reid et al., 2005, p. 1); thus, they answered in their own words and in detail through singular questions that allowed the participant time to reflect and answer (Reid et al., 2005). Each participant was informed that should any question cause discomfort to answer, it was to be discarded and the next question was be posed, as dictated in IPA procedures. Individual interviews were thought to take approximately 90 minutes in length and, during each interview, it was necessary for the researcher to listen intently to the participant’s experiences and, to the extent possible, remain unbiased. While interviewing each participant, it was also important to maintain a journal to record noteworthy observations of the participant, such as physical gestures and facial expressions, which may not have been heard on a voice recording (Creswell, 2013b).

**Data Storage.** According to Creswell (2013b), a premium was placed on the protection of participants and management of data. All audio and written files used in data collection and analysis were privately maintained on a personal password-protected laptop computer stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home office. Although all participants’ names were
replaced with pseudonyms, any audio files and data files that might identify participants’ names were stored exclusively on a password-protected virtual hard drive. Any notes written on paper were scanned, saved within the same password-protected computer, and the original paper copy shredded. There were no hard-copy versions of documents that would have revealed the identity of participants or programs.

All participants received a pseudonym prior to the beginning of the interview process securing their anonymity. The file that indicated the identities of each location and respondent resided exclusively on the cloud in a password-protected account accessible only by the researcher. At the conclusion of the research project, all audio files, and coded data files were securely archived on the computer and will remain there for a period of three years; after that time the files will be permanently deleted.

**Data Analysis Process.** The data analysis process began by having the audio tapes professionally transcribed. Prior to having the audiotapes transcribed, the transcriptionist signed a confidentiality statement (see Appendix F), and that will be kept on the cloud as well. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. To ensure accuracy, the researcher listened to the interviews and compared them to the transcriptions received.

Data analysis requires an identification of the essential experiences: perceptions and features of the participants’ making sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This was completed through line-by-line analysis, identification of emergent patterns, development of a framework to guide the relationships between themes, organization of themes in a format for analysis, supervision or collaboration to test interpretations, development of a full narrative, and, lastly, “reflection on one’s own perceptions, conceptions and processes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). Smith et al. (2009) reported that the process is not linear or easy nor is the clear path always
Researchers are left to reflect on the data enabling them to find the path that speaks to the lived experience and the themes that present themselves most clearly.

Dedoose is a web-based application supported data analysis. Users create a password-protected personal account and can immediately access a main dashboard with user-friendly headings such as “analyze,” “excerpts,” “codes,” and “descriptors” (Silver & Lewins, 2014, p. 3). Each of the headers allows the researcher to add audio, video or transcripts, to be uploaded and reviewed. The researcher creates the specific descriptors to be found and is able to edit, merge, or delete descriptors as necessary. This allows for comparison within and across interviews for connected descriptors (words and phrases) assigned in the study, to gain further insights, and possibly find themes missed by the naked eye and ear (Silver & Lewins, 2014). Ultimately, the data analysis software aided in simply organizing the codes and themes for easier reference while still relying on the interpretations of the researcher.

**Trustworthiness and verification.** Employing three specific procedures assisted in providing trustworthiness and validation to the study. In the case of this study, these included mechanically recorded data, member-checking and rich, thick descriptions. Interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed by a transcriptionist. Member-checking asked the participants to review their personal transcript, provide feedback and additional information where needed, which was specifically discussed when presented to the participants. Finally, the use of rich, thick descriptions allowed the reader an opportunity to transfer the meanings of the work to their own situations through “shared characteristics” (Creswell, 2013a, p. 252). These three validation strategies added to the strength of the study through validation of the written word.
**Positionality Statement.** The relationship between the researcher and the participant played an important role in interpretative phenomenological research (IPA). IPA is a dynamic process where the researcher plays an active role in the process (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The researcher must gain an insider’s perspective. To do this the researcher must become intimately acquainted with the participant’s world. This study explored the lived experience of urban preschool teachers and their role in fostering a home school partnership.

As the researcher, I identified myself as a parent, child-care provider, former teacher, and current administrator, who for more than thirty years made connections with families, although the urban connection was much more recent. The collective experiences gave me many opportunities to meet, speak, understand, and work with families in meaningful ways.

I grew up in a diverse, upper-middle class small town. Born to a Jewish father and an agnostic mother, who both converted to Catholicism while I was growing up, I was comfortable with all races and religions and my friends included both boys and girls, who were African American, Hispanic, and White; Orthodox Jews, Catholics and Baptists. Although my paternal grandfather was a bigoted Jewish man (who once yelled at a bus boy over a piece of pickle on a bread plate; my understanding was that it was due to his color), my assumption growing up was that we were all equal, it never occurred to me to categorize or differentiate based on gender, color, race, or socioeconomic standing.

My first experience working in an urban area was during the early 1980’s while attending Springfield College, Springfield, Massachusetts. My pre-practicum and practicum experiences were both completed in the public school settings within this city. My pre-practicum lasted only eight weeks, but I never really understood that there was a socioeconomic difference. I completed my practicum in a school on the outskirts of the city and it was similar to the one I
attended as a child and, as such, I did not connect the term “urban” with the school in which I was placed although by city standards, it was.

Teaching kindergarten in a parochial school in an urban neighborhood in New Jersey gave me a glimpse into the lives of lower middle-class families or those just barely getting by economically. They were active, engaged, and interested in the classroom and the learning. At any given time, I had two or three parents in my room helping, which was wonderful because while my students spoke English, many of their parents did not. The adults who were helping were bilingual and their ability to communicate with my more reserved, Spanish-speaking-only families was an asset. This experience taught me first-hand the benefits of including families in the difficult work of educating young children.

In yet another teaching position as a preschool teacher in a semi-urban yet somewhat suburban public school system, the focus was on students with special needs. As federal mandates dictate, there were seven special education (SPED) students and eight regular education students who provided a model of peer education. Parents of my regular education students were not entitled to busing so they would drop off and pick up their children every day. During this time, we were able to communicate easily face-to-face, and their child’s progress came more easily. My SPED students were entitled to busing and I rarely saw the parents of these students. We communicated through daily logs and phone calls. Weekly and sometimes daily communication was necessary in order to keep students working toward their potential, which came more slowly due to not only their complications but also the lack of parent visibility. It was more difficult but not impossible, providing the parents made the effort.

Lastly as the owner and operator of a home day care, I became an intimate part of each family, an important cog in the wheel of each child’s upbringing. My families were all middle
class, hardworking and committed to raising their children under the best possible conditions. While they could not be part of the everyday happenings at the house, having daily conversations meant the ability to work together in the best interest of their child. From this experience, I learned that committed parents were vital in the life of a child. These combined experiences allowed this me to live the experiences of the teacher in relation to home school partnerships from several vantage points. I have met a wide variety of parents from all different socio-economic classes, degrees of education, and desire of involvement in their child’s education. My assumption was that parents were generally interested and involved in the educational process.

Although I was previously a rural elementary assistant principal, at the time of this study I held the title of elementary school principal in an urban district; and those years were most eye-opening. My school was down a lovely side street on the outskirts of a very large urban city. The houses were close together, and there was a university just around the corner. The families in this neighborhood were similar in age, race, and income level. However, my overall student demographics told a very different story. These families and students were of many different races, socioeconomic status, religions, and abilities.

Two-thirds of my students’ came from what was commonly known as the “south end” and another low-income area several miles away. The students all rode the bus across town in excess of twenty-five minutes. Their families often could not get to our school for meetings and special events due to an inability to procure transportation, I was told by several parents not to bother them for this reason. Public busing was available, but it often would take several buses and many hours in one direction to end up at the school. Therefore, I assumed that students from disadvantaged backgrounds had a more difficult time accessing the educational system due to socioeconomic family struggles.
I had approximately 75 students with disabilities who were bused to the school for specialty programs housed in my building. Some of these families were engaged with the school and staff and worked hard to ensure their children were well cared for and academically challenged to the best of their ability while others were consumed with the struggles of day-to-day living. Some of the parents attended SPED meetings to insist on equality. For example, I knew one mother with two boys: one was in second grade and doing well; one was in kindergarten and suffering from bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. While the kindergartner struggled in school and had been to several treatment programs, mom was homeless and had been moved from shelter to shelter, none of which were close to her children’s school. Mom did not drive and often had to rely on public transportation or others for rides to school when her son had an episode or when there was a meeting. This particular mom was committed to her children’s education and it showed. The lesson was that there are larger issues that often prevent the accessibility of simply getting to school.

The high number of SPED students, and those that were bussed in from other areas of the city, were necessary due to the low numbers of students who lived in the immediate neighbourhood. These students would walk to school or were driven by their families. These families were sometimes involved in school events and were sometimes willing to come lend a hand. The diversity observed at my school was representative of most in the district. This dichotomy of student population and socioeconomic status of families influenced day-to-day learning in so many ways, often preventing families and students from accessing the educational system.

Equally important to the school make-up was my staff, who in reality were not as diverse as my student population. Of my 65 staff members, 30 were teachers, two of whom spoke fluent
Spanish. Two were men and one was of color. Most were between 30 and 55 years old. My paraprofessionals comprised another 15 staff members many of whom did not have college degrees, or were working on college degrees. During my tenure as principal, two returned to school working towards their Bachelor’s degree. Five spoke Spanish, one was of color, and several were Puerto Rican or of Puerto Rican decent. The paraprofessionals were either under twenty-eight or over thirty-five. The remainder of my support staff was a mix of Caucasian and Puerto Rican, some educated for positions like school adjustment counselor, speech and language, occupational and physical therapy or nursing, while others were non-educated but make delicious meals for my students to enjoy each day or whom kept my building sparkling clean. The lack of diversity in the teaching staff was a definite handicap. For example, if a Spanish-speaking parent came to the school and there was no one to translate, how would I help them? I had to find someone to translate, hopefully accurately. Although when one mother cursed at me in Spanish, I was quite happy that the paraprofessional did not translate her words.

The diversity of students in my school meant that I could not assume anything about any particular family but must be open to listening and working with each situation that arose. When a child came to school late, my first question was “Did you eat breakfast?” When a child came to school with his shirt inside out, I asked, “Do you need a clean shirt?” When a parent called for a taxi home and after an hour was still waiting, I offered a ride home. When a parent could not get to school for a meeting, we sometimes arranged a home visit. I once had a mother come for a meeting for her son. When it was time to leave, she did not have enough money for the taxi. I gave her the money and she promised to pay it back. She was in tears because she was afraid she would not be able to pick up her other two children who were across town in day care in time and then get home. The next day her son handed me a letter of thanks and blessings along with
the money loaned. In the note, the mother said she did not think kind people existed. Regardless of the situation, I realized that meeting the basic needs of student and family had to come first, only then could learning follow.

**Researcher Bias.** Central to this study was the relationship between researcher and participant. It is for this reason that Pascal, Johnson, Dore, and Trainor (2010) expressed the need for the researcher to “be-in-the-world” to more fully appreciate and grasp the perceived world. This concept can also be credited back to Heidegger (1962). If the relationship between researcher and participant is divided, the participant’s experience may be perceived as dissociated from the influences that shape personal life experiences. To ensure researcher bias did not influence the research, biases and perceptions were written in an electronic journal. Additionally, thick descriptions were used to show participant experiences accurately and allow readers to transfer the information to other settings (Geertz, 1973).
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to explore how urban public school preschool teachers made sense of their experiences while engaging in home school partnerships within an integrated classroom. The critical nature of home school partnerships was established by research. Researchers found that educational achievement is less about financial means and inequality than it is about parental engagement in their child’s education, and early childhood academic stimulus (DOE, 2010; Duncan et al., 2007; Stipek, 2006). Parents play a critical role in all aspects of child development and it is vital that parents of preschool students be engaged in the process of learning through home school partnership initiated by preschool teachers. As a result of substantial research and educator experience, home school partnership development was embedded as a mandate in NCLB (2002) for both teachers and school district administrators and continues to be a tenant of the proposed ESEA (Duncan, 2015).

IPA data was collected using semi-structured interviews using a protocol that enabled participants to offer rich narrative responses that were analyzed to derive a sense of how teachers derived meaning from their experiences engaging in home school partnerships. Individual interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and a brief email follow-up was initiated to clarify background data. The researcher maintained a handwritten journal to record noteworthy observations of the participant, including body language, and facial expressions, which may not be heard on a voice recording. Chapter 4 begins with an overview of the setting, participant demographics and characteristics, a brief overview of portions of each participant’s life story germane to study, and the study findings organized by themes.
Setting

The research site was an elementary school in western Massachusetts containing grades kindergarten through grade 5, with an additional 186 students that comprised one of the largest preschool populations in the district. All preschool students were taught in federally mandated inclusion classrooms, which meant that there were special education students and peers in equal distribution. The district as a whole had been designated as free lunch with this particular elementary school showing a free/reduced lunch rate of 93.1% in 2012 (Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, 2014). The district poverty rate was 33.3% and the serious crime rate was 55.9 per 1000 in 2012. Minority enrolment accounted for 92% of the students compared to a state average of 34%, and 22.2% were ELL’s. Finally, 24.6% of the 790 students were diagnosed with at least one disability.

Participants

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to identify and recruit preschool teachers as study participants. The study included eight state licensed preschool teachers working at a single public, urban school located in Western Massachusetts. Study data from semi-structured interview questions were organized into two categories, (a) demographic information, and (b) experiential data organized around themes. Demographic information included age, gender, ethnicity, educational attainment, teaching experience, and preschool experience. As shown in Table 1, one (13%) participant was ages 30-39, three (37%) were ages 40-49, and four (50%) were age ages 50-59. The study sample was slightly older than the average preschool teacher age of 47.
Table 1

**Participant Age Range**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 - 39</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 - 49</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 - 59</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 8.

All study participants were females and Caucasian, which is similar to the U.S. preschool industry average of 94.6% female and 78.4% Caucasian. As shown in Table 2, seven participants (87%) held master’s degrees, and one participant’s highest educational attainment was a bachelor’s degree, indicating that the study sample was significantly better educated than the average preschool teacher. The educational attainment level in the preschool industry overall was 27% master’s degree and 35% bachelor’s degree, while 38% completed some college or less. Study participants reported a mean of 15.3 (SD=6.8) years of preschool teaching and all but one reported more than a decade of experience. Participants were significantly more experienced than the industry average of 5.6 years of preschool teaching experience. The study sample mean number of years at their present school district of 9.3 (SD=3.3) indicated a level of stability substantially higher than the preschool industry average turnover rate of 25% to 40% (NACCRRA, 2012). Finally, all participants spent 100% of their adult professional career in education. In summary, study participants were better educated, more experienced, and longer tenured at their present school than industry averages. Table 2 presents the professional experience and educational attainment of the study participants:
Table 2

**Professional Experience and Educational Attainment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teaching Experience (Years)</th>
<th>Preschool Experience (Years)</th>
<th>Present School (Years)</th>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
<th>100% of Career in Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiley</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madeline</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remy</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N=8*

Participants answered semi-structured interview questions regarding demographics, economic status, family of origin, academic achievement, and a number of open-ended questions depending on each participant’s degree of response. Interview duration was between 15 and 40 minutes, depending on the participant’s level of interest.

**Limitations**

The interviews conducted as part of this study were relatively brief, despite room allowed for extensive conversations using the open response format. This may have been due to hesitation on the part of participants to divulge information concerning their school or to make statements that may be interpreted as being critical of school administration.
Life Stories

**Emily.** Emily’s background includes a master’s degree, 24 years of preschool teaching experience, and eight years of developing family school partnerships with the same school district. She recalls knowing as early as first grade that teaching was her calling. Emily had vivid and specific memories of wanting to be a teacher just like her mother:

“I knew when I was in first grade that I wanted to be a teacher. In high school, I took an understanding young children class (because I wanted to carry around the ‘egg baby’, which in turn led me to teach in the nursery school program in my high school. My brother & I … basically had the ‘run’ of the school waiting for Mom to be done teaching. My favorite thing was to pretend to be a teacher in one of the classrooms, using the teacher's manual, etc.” (Emily interview).

Her experience with young children began in high school as an aide for a nursery school program. Her love of children was rivalled only by her love for dogs, so when it came time for college the choice was between veterinarian school and early childhood education. When a potential job at a veterinary clinic fell through, she set off to become a preschool teacher.

Emily’s journey led her to a position with Head Start assisting children with Autism, Down’s syndrome, and speech/language and developmental delays. That experience shaped her desire and shifted her focus to public preschool programs to provide support and service to the neediest population. Her love for children was evident throughout the interview. She described her current position as follows:

“I fell in love with the school as soon as I walked in the door for my interview, I had a connection to the school and I felt very at ease, and it felt homey, and cozy, and just the culture within the school, it's a small school. You pretty much know all the staff in there
and you know most of the students that are in there in the school. It's a lot of collaboration with staff members, with activities within the school. It felt very connected.”

Emily’s passion for her students was expressed in the following: “I’ve bought them sneakers and clothes, just to make sure that they have stuff.” During her twenty-fourth year of teaching, Emily expressed the enthusiasm of first year teaching:

“Last year was the absolute best teaching year that I have ever had in my whole career. It was just wonderful and I just loved … the moms and continued to them in summer school last...I save all the thank you cards… anything the parents write to me, I save everything (Emily, Interview).

Jane. Jane’s background includes a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice, 30 years of education experience of which 12 were spent in preschool classrooms, and has 10 with the same school district. Her credentials include certificates in General Education K-6, and Special Education Pre-K to 9, and she was the first preschool teacher to win the Harold Grinspoon Award. Her mother was a significant influence in her life and worked for the Springfield, MA school district for 45+ year as a school secretary. One of her early memories of wanting to be a teacher is expressed in the following story.

“My brother & I would cross the bridge from Ludlow to Indian Orchard Elementary every day after school and basically had the "run" of the school waiting for her Mom to be done working. My favorite thing was to pretend to be a teacher in one of her friends' classrooms, using the teacher's manual, etc.”

Jane started college in the education department, but the school’s curriculum was the "take whatever courses you wanted" variety. The lack of structure was a bad fit for Jane, so she
switched her major to criminal justice because “they had a definite course list”. Shortly after graduation she was married, and raised children as a stay-at-home-mom, but her desire to teach led her back to school to get certified. After raising children for nine years, she joined the current school district where she spent the last 16 years teaching at a variety of levels. She gravitated to a special needs preschool because she felt there was a need for experienced, dedicated staff and found “It really was a perfect fit.”

Kiley. Kiley’s background includes a master’s degree in education and 22 years of education experience, 14 years of which were in her current district. Kiley had a keen interest in becoming a teacher as far back as her earliest recollection. She expressed the sentiment in the following response:

“I always wanted to be a teacher. My friends and I would "play school" growing up when we were in elementary school. My two uncles and an aunt taught elementary school and my mother was a part time teacher's assistant for about 10 years.”

Kiley’s early interest in education led her to an undergraduate degree in elementary education followed by a master’s degree in special education. Kiley’s entire 30 year career was spent in special education working with head trauma victims and students on the autistic spectrum, primarily in schools servicing low SES populations. Her teaching positions ranged from fulltime special education for inclusive classrooms to part time speech pathologist. While Kiley’s interest in teaching special needs children dates back to childhood, Kiley’s continuing interest is motivated in part by her youngest son’s Down’s Syndrome diagnosis. Her experience as the parent of a special needs child acquainted her with the demand such parents face finding appropriate educational environments. This experience reaffirmed the value of her contribution over a 30-year career.
For Kiley, each moment of her lived experience of teaching fulfils a lifelong ambition: “I always wanted to be a teacher. My friends and I would ‘play school’ growing up when we were in elementary school.” Education as a living is the fulfilment of earlier dreams that were planted when she was a child.

**Madeline.** Madeline’s background includes a master’s degree in Moderate Special Needs Education and 13 years of preschool education experience, all of which were in her current district. Madeline’s interest in special education was motivated in part by her younger sister’s Down’s syndrome. As a result of that experience, she “always felt connected to the special education world.” She attended Westfield State College (now Westfield State University) for early childhood education and was hired directly out of school by her current district, where she worked with special needs preschoolers ever since. The following quote expresses Madeline’s humble attitude about the potential for her to contribute meaningfully to this research project and her approach to the world.

“[This district] is a very big school and honestly, I feel very isolated in this classroom and I don't really ... I really can't speak too much for the whole school. We have a lot of preschool classrooms here though. I'm just a brick in the hallway and that's kind of it.”

**Mary.** Mary’s background includes a master’s degree in Counselling Education, 19 years of preschool education experience, and 11 years working with preschool special needs children in the same district. Her previous professional educational experience also includes four years as an assistant principal at KinderCare. Mary moved to western Massachusetts from Greece when she was 10 years old and realized her childhood dream when she joined her current district as a preschool special needs teacher. For Mary, teaching as a career was not a dream established in
childhood, but something she came to realize was her ideal career over time. This did not make it any less of a calling. Rather, it was a calling she came to realize later in life. As she said:

“I decided my heart was really teaching, especially early childhood, so I went back to school at the age of 37, got a bachelor's in early childhood education, and I finished my master's at the age of 50; I'm very, very proud about that.”

**Pam.** Pam’s background includes a master’s degree, 16 years of preschool education experience, and 6 years working with preschool special needs children in her current district. Pam was highly motivated to follow her passion into teaching and worked full time in a preschool classroom while obtaining her undergraduate and graduate degrees over a nine-year period. Pam’s mother owned and managed a preschool for 30 years while growing up, which provided ample opportunity to interact with pre-schoolers. She said:

“My mother encouraged me to start working with children as an aid in her school to see if I liked children and I thought it was something I might want to do. It was, so that is what led me to going back to school for teaching.”

**Remy.** Remy’s background includes a master’s degree in education, 20 years of preschool education experience, and one year working with preschool special needs children in her current district. Her professional experience includes five years of Head Start experience, five years as a public school teacher, and a variety of day-care jobs primarily with toddlers. Remy entered college as a speech therapy major and focused on communication disorders. While at college, Remy discovered that she had a pretty severe hearing loss that made it difficult for her to distinguish between different sounds and necessitating a change in educational direction and career choice. She chose began a start-up Head Start program, opened classrooms at multiple locations and was promoted to supervisor. At that point, she:
“…decided it was time to get my masters that I could go into teaching, because I had been doing things with children for so long and it was like okay, this is where I need to head to next.”

Sara. Sara’s background includes a master’s degree in education, 30 years of preschool education experience, and ten years working with preschool special needs children in her current district. Sara’s career began in her preschool teaching career managing child development centers for the military overseas for about three years. Her next assignment was working as a director of The Kids Place, which was “very stressful”, followed by eight years with Head Start. Sara had no childhood dream to become a teacher, nor were any of her siblings or children special needs. She characterized her career in education as “falling into working with preschoolers by accident.” She decided to leverage her education experience in the military by returning to school for education and expressed her journey to her current district as follows:

“There was not any one point that led me to this. My family was surprised when I ended up making a career into this. I think it was a combination of the job experiences I had that led me to this career and once you are in this career for so many years it just becomes what you do. I love the job I have and feel that I am able to offer a lot to my families and the children I serve.”

Research Question

How do eight teachers at one urban public preschool in western Massachusetts make sense of their experiences engaging in home school partnerships within an integrated classroom setting?

Findings and Analysis

More than 15 codes were identified using content analysis during the first several readings of the interview transcripts and follow-up emails. Participating teachers were all hard-
working educators with a serious dedication to improving the lives of the children entrusted to their care. Beyond their competence and commitment was a shared value that (a) their work was important for themselves and society as a whole, (b) held a prominence in their lives as a whole, and (c) teaching fills their lives with meaning and purpose. Emily summed it up by saying, “This is my life, the kids, the classroom and everything; this is just what I do” (Emily, Interview).

Superordinate themes emanated from observation of participant’s value systems, how they lived their lives, and how they found meaning in life. After reviewing interview transcripts, field notes, emails, and researcher’s journal entries, there was a growing sense that the lived experience of study participants’ experience of home school partnership could be distilled into five major themes. The coding process unfolded as a process of data reduction. Many of the originally coded units of data overlapped or were not sufficiently substantial to provide insight, eventually leading to the recognition that the lived experiences of the participating teachers reflected four superordinate themes: 1) disconnected by differences; 2) connected through empathy; 3) comradery through shared experiences; 4) security from administrative support.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Ordinate Themes and Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| #1.Disconnected by differences | #1.1. *Disconnected by parent mistrust:* “90% of the parents do not want us in the homes. I get a few parents that allow me to go into the homes, but still most of them want to come in here. I think they think we're going to report them or something. I try to give them that comfort level that I'm not there to judge” (Mary, Interview). 

“I find in the beginning it’s a little reluctant. Parents might be reluctant to share things or to immediately be connected and I find a little bit of reservation from families because they might not necessarily had a previous experience that was so positive” (Emily, Interview).

#1.2. *Challenged by cultural and communication differences.* 

“Communication is a struggle because we have a lot of ELL and parents that don’t speak English. It's primarily a Spanish speaking population, so that's been a struggle” (Mary, Interview).

#1.3. *Challenged by value differences.* “I think the parents had certain beliefs and expectations that didn't quite meld with what public school…They were just waiting for us to screw up” (Mary, Interview).
| #2. Connected through empathy | #2.1 *Connected through action.* “I would start the relationships with the families before school even starts. We also have a family day to begin this year so looking at it that would just be the beginning communication with the parents” (Pam, Interview).  
#2.2 *Positivity through collaboration.* “To me, parents are, of course, children’s first teacher. I try to make that known to parents, you're the expert on your kid, and I’m not the expert. I don't spend as much time with them as you do and rely on them for some guidance at times” (Remy, Interview).  
#2.3 *Climate creates comfort.* “I'm excited to meet the child as well as them, and then I approach my parents often as a group to establish a community to support each other. There's a lot of joking going on” (Mary, Interview). |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#3. Comradery through shared experiences</td>
<td>“I have asked families if they could donate things to the class rooms. If they could save things from home to add into our classroom of things. We've sent them little activities to do at home with their children and then bring them back to school, so that we have like a classroom display, or some type of family project. We've had parents come in and do stories or participate in activities in the classroom or in the school so that they feel connected” (Emily, Interview).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
#4. Security from administrative support

[The administration] “… very much encourages families to come in. I know some schools, they don’t do that. Yes, so they’re very open to having volunteers in their classroom, they encourage any opportunity to meet after school. So it gives teachers a lot of opportunity to have families in as much as we want to” (Remy, Interview).

**Super-ordinate Theme #1- Disconnected by differences**

Participants felt distanced from parents due to several reasons. The participants perceived that parents did not trust the school to do an adequate job educating students. At other times, cultural and language differences made it difficult to communicate important messages to parents. Finally, teachers often felt parents should play a larger role in the education of their children than parents felt they should. These themes indicate a disconnection between the participants and parents.

*Disconnected by parent mistrust.* Many of those interviewed described a disconnection between themselves as instructors and their interactions with the parents. They attributed this disconnection to parental misgivings toward the instructor. However, these misgivings were possibly rooted in negative experiences with educators in the past. Emily and Madeline described parents’ emotional trepidation to the parent-teacher relationship in the following way:

“I find in the beginning it's a little reluctant. Parents might be reluctant to share things or to immediately be connected and I find a little bit of reservation from families because they might not necessarily had a previous experience that was so positive” (Emily, Interview).
Both Emily and Madeline demonstrated the difficulties of trying to bond with parents. For Emily, her greatest concern was the fear parents had toward teachers based upon their previous experiences. These past events influence Emily’s relationship to the parents and her ability to connect with them immediately. For Madeline, the problem was more fundamental. She felt that parents had trouble letting go of their children and entrusting them to another individual. Madeline had to work to overcome these through home visits and family days. Both indicated the initial difficulties of trying to form bridges with parents. As Mary stated:

“They come to school and there's definitely a little bit of fear because they are letting go of their babies for the first time. I think you really have to work on the trust, just getting the kid in the door. Then going on a home visits and having the families come in for family days, I think it definitely helps but I think trust is a big thing in the beginning” (Madeline, Interview).

**Challenged by cultural and communication differences.** Language was often at the core of some of the difficulties that participants encountered when trying to interact with parents from different cultural backgrounds. Teachers particularly noted that it was hard to establish communication with parents for whom English is their second language. This impacted the ability for teachers to communicate directly with parents, as well as alert them to school information through notices and newsletters. Communication was typically unidirectional and initiated by the teacher, although such efforts were sometimes hindered by communication barriers. As Mary said:

“Communication is a struggle because we have a lot of ELL and parents that don't speak English. It's primarily a Spanish speaking population, so that's been a struggle.”
However, the difficulties that emerged from ELL parents were compounded when there were students whose first language included more than one language. In such cases, a difference in languages made it that much more difficult for teachers to try and keep parents up to date on school events. Concerning this, Sara said:

“It's really difficult, because you're trying to offer these programs for parents, but it's kind of a hard battle sometimes to get them in there. Sometimes it's a huge language problem, because I can't have everything translated into 4 different languages. When you have to get notices out, you have to just write something up and get it out there, and then try to grab someone to translate, so I think that is one of the biggest struggles we have when we're doing some individual things, and to tell the parents and to get them to understand what we want them to do” (Sara, Interview).

Challenged by value differences. Participants often encountered troubles with parents whose values did not seem to match their own. In terms of time prioritization, teachers felt they expected certain time investments that parents either did not know how to meet or could not meet based upon time limitations. Although teachers were often passionate about instructing students, they believed some parents expected that instructors would do a sub-standard job of instructing students. Remy felt that parental hopes that students would do well under her instruction were sometimes low. As she said:

“I think the parents had certain beliefs and expectations that didn't quite meld with what public school…They were just waiting for us to screw up.”

In some cases, such as Remy’s, she perceived that parents did not believe the instructor would teach the students adequately. However, other teachers encountered a different values gap. Kiley felt that it was difficult getting parents to communicate with her at all:
“The parent always had something to do, you know…I just felt so bad because there was really no connection. We tried to reach out but the parent had other children and other things and they were very young parents…It was like pulling teeth just to get information…teachers have called up and encouraged the home visit and they get there and the family's not even home…I think giving the parents the choice, because some parents don't want you coming to their house” (Kiley, Interview).

Some participants believed that there were parents who felt they did not have a role in the education of their children. This seemed to be based on a belief that the education of the child was best left to those who had trained in it. Sara reported that:

“I had a mother in a meeting once say to me, we were talking about ways that she could help at home when she said, ‘Wait, stop, I didn't go to school for education, my job isn't to teach the child, that's yours (Sara, Interview).

This approach, in which parents clearly separated the duties of teaching from parenting, was mirrored in other circumstances. Mary reported that, among other things, parents did not always check their children’s’ bags for homework. This could have been for a variety of reasons, including a lack of familiarity with their role in the education process, but Mary confirmed that:

“We send books home, we do a reading tree, for example. We celebrate the books that the kids read at home. One Mom, for example, said to me ‘Oh, I don't really have time to look in the backpack,’ and that just really broke my heart. Another parent was saying, ‘Oh, I don't read anymore…I don't have time to read.’ It was just really heart-breaking” (Mary, Interview).
Super-ordinate Theme #2- Connected through empathy

Teachers and parents bonded as teachers demonstrated the value they placed on parent-teacher relationships. Teachers also bridged the gap between themselves and teachers by eliminating the gap between classroom and home, which they accomplished both by sending work home as well as by bringing in parents to the class. These positive actions helped to unite parents and teachers in the work of instructing students.

*Connected through action.* Participants regularly sought ways to demonstrate empathy in a way that would cultivate close partnerships with parents. Developing this sort of relationship required the teacher to take the initiative in developing the relationship, which was potentially related to past adverse experiences parents had with schools. For Mary, it required that she make herself available from the very start of the relationship:

“I place great importance on the relationship between parent and teacher first of all, so I make sure that I'm available to the parents, I establish a good relationship right off the bat for my first phone call” (Mary, Interview).

Participants had to put in the effort to make families comfortable with them. This was important considering the past negative experiences with educators that Emily noted might influence current parent-teacher relationships. For Pam, connecting to parents required that she make herself available and open. This created a sense of comfort between them. This was an effort that began at the beginning of the year, but that had a payoff by year’s end. As she said:

“I tend to personally have a very open relationship with my families and the parents so they feel comfortable with their kids coming here. That seems to work for me. I know some people tend to hold them out a little further and not have that personal relationship but it kind of works better for me...As the year progresses, I get to see a lot of the parents
but my special needs kids. That's another part of the school year besides our regular late
day meetings and I also have the open door policy. You call and you make an
appointment any time you need me and we'll have a meeting”

The actions teachers took could demonstrate to parents a teacher’s willingness to make
extra effort in helping a student succeed. Kiley attempted to be flexible in her approach to
parents, which was a key in creating that connection. As she said:

“I mean we really give the parents more of a choice now. Would you like us to come to
your home or would you like to come in to school? We established more partnerships that
way”

Remy added to that sentiment and described the process as procedural:

“Here it's pretty easy because we have a questionnaire for parents, which asks: What's
important about your child? What's important in your family culture? What does your
child like to do, what's important to know about your child? Alternatively, in an early
conversation I would inquire: Tell me something that I should know about your child
who's coming into my classroom. What do they like? What do they dislike? What's
important to know about your family that I can be respectful of those belief here in my
room?” That seems to make everybody feel welcome; I don't want anyone to feel like
their kid has to be somewhere else, because we're doing something in here that isn't a part
of their family beliefs. Just having that conversation before the child starts. I always offer
parents my email address, welcome to email me with anything as we go thought the
school year.”

**Positivity through collaboration.** Participants demonstrated a desire to work with parents
to increase the success of their students. Whether through home visits or parent-teacher meetings
on school days, they tried to develop relationships that would produce collaborative efforts between them and a child’s parents. This relationship was highly valued. For Remy, it could be no other way. To her, parents were as much teachers as she herself was:

“To me, parents are, of course, children's first teacher. I try to make that known to parents, you're the expert on your kid, and I’m not the expert. I don't spend as much time with them as you do and rely on them for some guidance at times.”

**Climate creates comfort.** Creating healthy relationships required creating an environment in which parents felt at ease conversing with the teachers. Developing this atmosphere was a responsibility participants took upon themselves. For Mary, the easiest way to cultivate a friendly environment was to approach parents in groups. This gave her a chance to interact with them as just another individual and to use humour as a means of developing good rapport:

“I'm excited to meet the child as well as them, and then I approach my parents often as a group to establish a community to support each other. There's a lot of joking going on.”

Consistent with other teachers who emphasized that relationship building began from the very start of the year, Pam emphasized that she would begin trying to develop relationships before the first day of school in an effort that would continue throughout the rest of the year:

“I would start the relationships with the families before school even starts. We also have a family day to begin this year so looking at it that would just be the beginning communication with the parents.”

**Super-ordinate Theme #3- Comradery through shared experiences**

In an attempt to integrate parents into the lives of the students and show parents the important role they could play in the education of their children, teachers took several steps to bridge the classroom and home. This also developed a form of comradery as a sense of
partnership between teacher and parents. Emily was asked parents to send items from around their homes into the class and sent activities to the home, where parents could share in the duty of instructing their children. As she said:

“I have asked families if they could donate things to the class rooms. If they could save things from home to add into our classroom of things. We've sent them little activities to do at home with their children and then bring them back to school, so that we have like a classroom display, or some type of family project. We've had parents come in and do stories or participate in activities in the classroom or in the school so that they feel connected.”

For some teachers, involving parents meant going directly to their homes. Bringing the classroom home also meant having children demonstrate a classroom activity for their parents. Through these demonstrations, parents realized the importance of their role in the education process. As Kiley said:

“We would go to the home and demonstrate some of the things that we were working on here at school and we would have the student do it for his mom and dad at home, sometimes dad would even take time off from work too.”

Among the most common ways to invest parents in the educational lives of their children was through simple paperwork. Simply keeping parents informed was a means of keeping parents updated on the activities of their children. Both Madeline and Mary reported sending out papers to help keep parents informed about their children’s work:

“There's a lot of different parts to it. Every day I fill out a daily paper. I write things that we're working in school, important things that the parent should know about what we're doing in the classroom and then I have another paper that the parents fill out. Because the
kids can't speak, they write any little comments, anything they did over the weekend, if it's they had a party, anything that the kid can't tell us (Madeline, Interview).

“"I send a newsletter always weekly to tell them exactly what we're doing, what words we're learning, what books we're reading, what activities we're learning in ways that they can also follow up at home as well. There's a lot of communication (Mary, Interview).

A subset of home school integration that participants described was the opportunity to model appropriate parental behavior. Jane related it as follows: “I'll read a book, basically to show the parents how you read a book to the children...because some of these parents just don't know they are supposed to (Jane, Interview). Kiley was a little more literal about it, “We sometimes will read a story and model for the parents, you know, how they should be reading to the kids at home and asking the questions and everything” (Kiley, Interview).

“I invite parents in the classroom. I model how to read. They have the opportunities to do activities with their children that they can also do at home. I invite parents in to volunteer as often as they can. Then, I'm always saying that this is a partnership. I send a newsletter always weekly to tell them exactly what we're doing, what words we're learning, what books we're reading, what activities we're learning in ways that they can also follow up at home as well. Wow, these parents really enjoy coming in and being involved and learning things. Because a lot of the families like to learn things to take home and do with their children” (Mary, Interview).

“We were talking in class about appropriate ways to calm down, self-regulate, and make good choices after. Of course, it's put your hand on your tummy, take a breath so calm down, count, and we have the poster there, and we have a designated area, but we also generalize it to any part of the building that we may be in. One student’s parent was upset
and offered the parents a solution…” I have a solution.’ She said, ‘My husband and I just froze.’ He said, ‘Okay mom, dad, listen. Put your hand on your tummy, say calm down, take three breaths, and count,” then he kept going, ‘Did it work? Did it work? Did it work?’ This is something that a child took it home, and of course their parents already knew about what we were doing at home because we had discussed it” (Mary, Interview).

Emily, Madeline, and Jane expressed a desire to collaborate with parents in ways that are commonly thought of as a community. To foster a sense of community, or shared values, parent and teacher interactions should involve collaboration and shared experiences as a mode of operation. A community refers to a set of shared beliefs, philosophies, or values about the importance of shared responsibility and mutual respect.

In that vein, Emily offered that “At different points during the year everybody would bring food representative of their home culture and we would have a big potluck community event (Emily, Interview). Madeline added: “We have family days, usually once or twice a year where the parents can come in and do something enjoyable where parents could enjoy making cookies with their child, or things like that” (Madeline, Interview). Jane had an even more impressive instance of shared responsibility:

“Teachers would walk to certain areas, rather than have parents bring the kids to school, the teachers bring the kids to school….. We did it all last year, all through the winter (Jane, Interview).

Super-ordinate Theme #4- Security from administrative support

Administration provided a supportive role in creating environments in which teachers felt comfortable trying to generate new and creative ways of bridging the gap between home and the classroom. Participants noted that their administration encouraged efforts to integrate parents
into classroom activities. The school, on a large scale, also took an active approach to bringing in parents by hosting campus wide activities.

**Security promotes risk-taking.** School administrative support of home school partnerships manifested in a variety of ways for participants. Effective administrators can provide moral, financial, and evaluative support, or they can serve as advocates both in and out of school. They can help overcome obstacles, or provide necessary oversight or guidance for particularly difficult special needs cases. Participants expressed or implied that the school administration was particularly supportive, and that the impact was important to teachers and parents alike. Jane, Madeline, Pam, and Remy related experiences that added value to their lives.

School administration policies and procedures affected participants’ lives on a daily basis and were a tangible part of the fabric that connected teachers with parents.

For Jane, positive support from the school was not limited to administration, but extended schoolwide:

“I do know the school is very positive and supportive about home school partnerships. Counselors are constantly doing all kinds of activities. The PTO's doing activities to encourage home school partnerships, to get the parents in here, and to get those conversations going. The school has been like that for a long, long, long, long, time.”

Administrative support created new and innovative ways of engaging parents beyond the traditional home visit or open house night. Ongoing support from administration encouraged new ways of trying to create relationships with parents. Kiley discussed how the school had been involved in ongoing, innovative forms of outreach:

“I think they've been doing this for like two years now with the whole, you know, doing the home school partnership with the entire school. They're trying to have more
opportunities for parents to come in to school especially with the PTO.....but I mean they do family fun night. They tried to do activities. They do a coffee hour. The parent facilitator is here as always, she's really good.”

For Madeline, the new means of outreach were directly attributable to the policies set forward by the principal. In this way, administrative support was critical to promoting innovative forms of outreach to parents. This was in contrast to previous administrations, whose policies teachers perceived as impeding, rather than encouraging, greater parent relationships. As she said:

“The school as a whole is I think always trying to encourage parents to be involved. I think Lisa more so than previous principals really, tries to have the parents come in for coffee hours and [crosstalk 00:25:10] ... Different events to try to get the parents in the door. I feel like in the past years, with the previous principals, it was definitely like a stop at the office, you can't come down here.”

The change in policies that arose following the new administration was felt among the participants. They contrasted their experiences with those of other schools where restrictive policies could inhibit the building of relationships. This led to innovative attempts to build connections with parents. Holidays formed a key time for families to spend time with their children and the school did not miss out on the opportunity to tie family building with school relationships. Although the school participated in traditional forms of outreach, it also tried to bring parents into the school. According to Pam:

“We very much encourage to have families in. I know some schools; they don't do that. Yes, so they're very open to having volunteers in their classroom, they encourage any opportunity to meet after school, so if I wanted to Thanksgiving potluck in the cafeteria,
you know, just have to make sure that's available after school on that day. So it gives us a lot of opportunity to have families in as much as we want to.”

Sara reinforced the notion of holiday outreach as important, among others:

“We do a Thanksgiving dinner where the parents come in at night, or families can come in. I think our school tries to be really welcoming to parents. I think everyone's made an effort to know that parents, even though the doors are locked, they know they can ring that bell and someone's going to let them in. I think they try to do a good job through Connect-ED calls, through school newsletters, our personal preschool newsletters, and there's always so many events going on. I think they try to make the parents feel welcomed enough to come in to the school” (Sara, Interview).

The impact of these policies was tremendous. Remy reiterated that the school attempted traditional forms of outreach in addition to innovative ones. What was important was that the school was so highly engaged with parents. This created an environment in which parents felt drawn to the school and seemed to help them overcome any past negative experiences with educators. She noted this:

“Here we do newsletters weekly. I didn't do it in upper grades, but here we do them weekly. This school really fosters that from day one. When you said impact I would think anything negative, because of where we are and who we are we have these families that just love the school to pieces and want their kids to come here. I think that it supports and impacts all in the same way, because of the nature of the kind of school that we are…”

**Summary**

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis was to explore how urban public school preschool teachers made sense of their experiences while engaging in home-school
partnerships. Researchers found that educational achievement was less about one’s financial means or inequality than it was about parental engagement (Duncan et al., 2007; Stipek, 2006; DOE, 2010). IPA data was collected using a semi-structured interview protocol that enabled participants to offer rich narrative responses to provide a rich picture of how teachers derived meaning from their experiences engaging in home school partnerships. Responses were transcribed verbatim and reported in this chapter.

Participant narratives reflected four superordinate themes.Disconnected by differences was the first super-ordinate theme. Participants expressed frustration because of four subordinate themes, (a) disconnected by distrust, (b) challenged by cultural and communications differences, and (c) challenged by differences. Connected through empathy was the second super-ordinate theme. Participants emphasized that parents were a child’s first teacher and tried to bond with parents. Comradery through shared experiences was the third superordinate theme. Teachers searched for ways to extend the classroom into the homes, but also for ways to bring the home into the classroom. Security from administrative support was the fourth superordinate theme. Effective administrators provided moral, financial, and evaluative support, or they served as advocates both in and out of school. The excerpts from interviews presented here illustrate a mosaic of participants lived experiences of home school partnership.
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to examine how eight teachers in one Massachusetts urban public preschool made sense of their experience engaging in home-school partnerships within an integrated classroom setting. Teachers act as the connection between families and academic institutions, policies, and practices and, as such, are central figures in partnering with families (Duncan, 2015; Epstein, 2011). Additionally, Epstein (1987, 2011) consistently describes situations in which positive partnership experiences lead to a greater overlap of the spheres of influence. The remainder of this chapter illustrates the links to Epstein’s Family School Partnership Framework (1987), discusses the relationship between study findings and current literature, and offer suggestions for future practice and possible ideas for future research. It should be noted that because the framework is directed at what teachers should do instead of their experiences, connections to the theoretical framework are limited.

Disconnected by Differences

*Links to literature.* In this study, participants experienced a feeling of disconnectedness that was perceived by teachers as feelings of mistrust from some families during attempts to make appointments or home visits. Teachers also struggled to understand their experiences with families due to cultural and communication differences. Finally, participants perceived different experiences and expectations between families and teachers.

Several studies (Chavkin & Williams, 2001; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Gary & Witherspoon, 2011; Meyer et al., 2011) support the teacher experiences expressed in the findings. According to the literature (Meyer et al., 2011), teachers experienced frustration when families failed to be home at the time of a scheduled meeting or when families avoided meeting with teachers. Additionally, one study (Meyer et al., 2011) stated that in a survey group of
twenty-nine teachers many experienced frustration regarding barriers that prohibited parental engagement due to differences such as rituals, procedures and implementation of activities.

**Implications for theory.** When teachers struggled with their experiences, as in *Disconnected by Differences*, Epstein (1987) states that the internal spheres of influence had a much smaller overlap, which adversely affected the student. During this study, several teachers perceived parental mistrust, cultural and communication differences, and value differences. These were described by Mary when she discussed how difficult it was to make a home visit because “90% of the parents do not want us in the home” (Mary, interview). Emily agreed when she commented that, “Parents might be reluctant to share things or immediately be connected, and I find a bit of reservation from families” (Emily, interview). Mary also saw the language barrier as a connection struggle because many of the families did not speak English while the majority of the staff spoke English.

Teachers made attempts to understand the differences between themselves and the families, however perhaps they didn’t really understand what parents needed. Epstein’s (1987) theoretical framework does not specifically take into account cultural and linguistic differences that may impede the creation of partnerships. However, the framework does acknowledge the importance of limiting such barriers (Epstein, 2011). Additionally, while not mentioning how teachers experience these differences, Epstein (2011) admits there were dilemmas that include a lack of parent involvement with the school and families that were too busy “staying alive” (p. 125) to be able to access the proposed partnership.

Another finding of this study was that within the context of the family-like home, teacher perceptions of value that families held were different from their own. Remy described this by saying, “I think the parents had certain beliefs and expectations” (Remy, interview). Kiley
seemed to have a different take on the experience of making a family-like school when she stated, “I just felt so bad because there was really no connection...It was like pulling teeth just to get information” (Kiley, interview). Clearly in these situations, creating a family-like school was an experience the teachers felt was challenging and frustrating. In such circumstances, the overlap of spheres would have been small, and teachers expressed frustration that would limit the connectivity between family and school. In her theory of these phenomenon, Epstein (1987) did not address the experience of teachers who believed that parents were reluctant to engage. However, it is suggested that it is necessary to make significant efforts to partner. Epstein leaves the creative license of how to partner in the hands of the teachers.

**Implications for practice.** Epstein’s (2011) first type of involvement is called parenting. This key is defined as one that “helps all families establish home environment to support children as students” (p. 395). The goal is to help parents establish a safe and supportive home environment with the help of specific programs, home visits, workshops and education. According to Epstein (2011), teachers may experience an appreciation of their student’s cultures and backgrounds, family concerns, and student diversity within their classroom. Also important is the teachers’ feelings of a deepened respect for “families’ strengths and efforts” (p. 402) and their own awareness of skills as they “share information on child development” (p. 402). Activities that fall within this key area are parent of the week, home visits, and positive calls home and conferences.

A positive call home, when made at the beginning of the year, and in front of their peers, has been found to be a powerful tool in communicating with families (Sabo, 2014). This quick call allows students to be seen in a positive light by both their peers and their families, and often eliminates much of the negative classroom behavior. Parents appreciate the initial positivity and
studies have found they are more willing to be co-teachers during the year knowing that their student is making a constructive contribution in the classroom and that calls home were not only for communicating negative behavior or missed homework assignments.

Home visits also allow for the family and the teacher to get to know each other, ask questions, share information, and create goals for the students (Harvard, 2014; van Voorhis et al., 2013). Discussing mutually agreed upon roles and student goals ensure that both parent and teacher shared in the responsibility of learning (Epstein, 2011; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Ideally, visits happened two to three times a year, coinciding with report cards; the first to create goals for the student, the others to evaluate progress and update goals as necessary (Grant & Ray, 2013; Hynes, 2014).

The age-old parent conference can take on a new face if teachers wish to learn more about the parents of their students. Prior to the conference, the teacher can send home a list of questions that are often posed by parents or a questionnaire asking what the family might want to know or does not understand. During each conference, the teacher would be able to address the questions and concerns. At the end of the conference the teacher could share a book, activity, or game, show the family how to use it, and send it home for the family to share with the student. These suggestions for practice would increase connectedness and may eliminate some of the mistrust and communication differences teachers experienced.

Linguistic differences may require some form of intervention. To address this need, the inclusion of a bilingual paraprofessional and or a teacher who has the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) as part of the classroom teaching team, will help guide student practice and assist the classroom teacher. Teachers who seek to understand their families better will find that a bilingual paraprofessional or ESOL teacher could also be used in addressing parents
directly, either in-person or to make the phone calls home; thus bridging the gap between classroom teacher and family.

**Connected through Empathy**

*Links to literature.* Participants who experienced a connectedness through empathy expressed that they sought to understand families through actions such as family events and collaboration to get to know the families better. Additionally, teachers experienced a climate in which they felt comfortable and perceived that families felt the same.

Pundits (Epstein, 2011; Griffith, 1998; Harvard, 2014; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013) agreed that when teachers partner with families in a variety of ways, parental engagement increased which in turn allowed teachers to understand the families better. However, the literature reviewed for this study failed to identify specific ways in which empathy connected teachers and families. This complicated the findings but in no way minimized the importance of teacher experiences and how they seek to understand those experiences.

*Implications for theory.* The experience of teachers who recognize that they must open up to all families and include them in many aspects of learning was seen clearly by several teachers. Pam explained that she worked toward a relationship prior to the beginning of school: “I would start the relationships with the families before school even starts with a family fun day” (Pam, interview). In this way, she began a dialogue that seemed to grow throughout the year. Remy, too, explained to the families that while she was the child’s first classroom teacher, the family is the expert on the child and she relied “on them for guidance at times” (Remy, interview). Perhaps Mary was most excited about the family-like school connection when she said, “I’m excited to meet the child as well as them [the parent] … there’s a lot of joking going on” (Mary, interview).
The concepts expressed here support the framework established by Epstein (1987). When both family and school spheres support a child, it creates a wide overlap and many opportunities for the family and school to work together. Epstein (2011) did not state how a teacher might understand the experience, merely that for programs to be most successful that there must be parent involvement.

**Implications for practice.** Epstein (2011) describes the communication key as the “design [of] effective communications from school-to-home and from home-to-school about school programs and their children’s progress” (p. 395). Teachers who use this practice may experience an increase in their own ability to communicate while finding new ways to reach families and communicate through a parent network (Epstein, 2011). Practices that underscore communication techniques include Class DoJo (ClassTwist, Inc., 2016) and Parent of the Week.

“Parent of the Week” is an idea similar to Student of the Week in which each student in the classroom is in the spotlight for that week. They usually complete an all-about-me paper or create a special board with pictures and things special to that child. For the parent, the teacher would send home a questionnaire and materials for the student/parent combo to make an “all–about-me” board that would then be posted in the classroom. The parent would come in and help the child but also help in other ways as directed by the teacher. The parent would be announced during morning announcements as the parent guest-of-the-day. Mapp and Kuttner (2013) stated that such total immersion in the classroom helps create a positive supporting role for the parent. Rather than have a single parent come in, several could also be invited in order to have them work together with oversight from the teacher in order to increase collaboration between parents as well.
Technology partnerships are a new-age twist on the traditional call home and the student-centered behavior chart. Teachers currently have at least one option called Class DoJo (ClassTwist, Inc., 2016) that allows teachers and families to connect via computer, tablet, or smartphone, reinforcing positive behaviors, and posting short videos and pictures of students. Sent only to the student’s family, this direct link allows parents to respond to the teacher with questions or comments and give feedback to the student once the school day is over. These practices connect teachers and families through action, collaboration, and in a comfortable climate thus allowing teachers to experience better partnerships.

The use of a variety of in-person and technology partnerships provides teacher experiences with the families of their students and vice versa. Regardless of the situation at home, it is important to teachers that they perceive effort on the part of parents. Whether through technology or the use of a parent of the week system, parent participation would be seen as rewarding to teachers. Giving flexible options for parental participation helps parents, however the important part from a teacher’s perspective is that some form of participation occur. The flexible options increase the chance of that. Celebrating other cultures in the school and classroom is one more way in which parents of differing cultures could be made to feel welcome, and this would help teachers increase their understanding of other cultures as well as to connect with parents from these backgrounds.

**Comradery through Shared Experiences**

*Links to literature.* Participants within this study explained a number of ways they experienced comradery, in some cases by asking families to donate items from the home for use in the classroom, and at other times encouraging a parental presence at school. Their experiences were generally positive and teachers were able to see the benefits of partnering with families in
these shared events such as asking families to send in items, add to a classroom display or inviting parents in to participate in an activity; however, the literature suggests a much different story.

Previous literature (Chavkin & Williams, 2001; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Gary & Witherspoon, 2011) did not support the findings in this study and in fact were in direct conflict. The participants in these studies described experiences in which they perceived barriers to parental engagement to include additional time to implement parent activities, rituals and procedures (Chavkin & Williams, 2001; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Gary & Witherspoon, 2011).

While the teachers did mention that it took time to create and implement such experiences, none expressed this as a struggle or barrier. This dichotomy of experiences shows the wide range of teacher perceptions and experiences when including families in the learning process.

**Implications for theory.** Within *Comradery through Shared Experiences*, there is also a family-like school connection made when Mary stated that she had asked “I invite parents in the classroom. I model how to read. They have the opportunities to do activities with their children that they can also do at home. I invite parents in to volunteer as often as they can. Then, I'm always saying that this is a partnership.” From this comment, it was clear that Mary’s feels her experience was affirming. Epstein suggested that such encouraging experiences created a greater overlap between the spheres of influence (1987, 2011). It is important to note that while Epstein’s (1987, 2011) framework guides the work; it is up to the teacher to create what the partnership would look, feel and act like.

**Implications for practice.** Epstein (2011) explains that volunteering, the third key, is meant to “recruit and organize parent help and support” (p. 395). Here teachers may expect to experience more individual attention for students with the help of volunteers as well as a
renewed awareness of “parent talents and interests in school and children” (Epstein, 2011, p. 402) that may lead to even more ways to partner. Volunteering is one such example.

Volunteering programs provide an opportunity for parents to come to school on a predetermined schedule to help with classroom activities, small group lessons, or one-on-one interventions. Teachers are responsible for assembling all the necessary parts of the intervention or activity and explaining it to the adult, who then take the assigned students for the lesson. For example, a preschool student is having difficulty with one-to-one correspondence; the teacher may put a game together in which the volunteer rolls a die with a number on it and the student needs to put that number of manipulatives next to the die. After the volunteer and student have completed the activity, the parent and teacher would debrief. Epstein (2013) stated that this approach creates a “family-like school” and helps parents increase their ability to make home learning more viable.

Security from Administrative Support

Links to Literature. The majority of the findings in this study focus on the actions educators took to partner with families and how they understood their experiences. However, teachers in this study noted that the support of administration was critical to the success of these partnerships. Further, the participants noted that the support they received was in contrast to previous administration support, which did not encourage building partnerships. The literature review did not confirm or contradict the experiences of the teachers. There were no studies that investigated or explained the experiences of teachers in regards to administrative support or how secure participants felt when taking risks in the name of partnerships.

Implications for Theory. Within Security from Administrative Support, it was clear that even the administration supported family-like schools when Remy declared that the
administration “very much encourages families to come in” (Remy, interview). It is clear from this statement that teachers made efforts to create a family-like school in which all families are important. Teachers within this study intuitively attempted to bridge the two spheres and provided support in the classroom by attempting to bring parents into the school. When this occurred, the overlap of spheres was greater, and the teachers benefited from the connections made. These examples revealed how the family and school spheres in Epstein’s model (1987) work together. However, Epstein (2011) fails to emphasize how the role of the administration directly influences the experiences of teachers.

**Implications for Practice.** Epstein (2011) describes learning at home, the fourth key, as a way to “provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning” (p. 395). Here the goal is to create bonds while providing information to families regarding school-wide and classroom expectations, policies, and more. Epstein (2011) stated that teachers who use this practice may experience an “ah-ha” moment as they motivate and reinforce student’s learning. Epstein also stated that teachers may experience a sense of “satisfaction with family involvement and support” (Epstein, 2011, p. 402) as families and students have opportunities to come together and chat, work on content area activities and enjoy a meal or exercise with the ultimate goal of providing information and experiences to help families be successful at home. Examples of these practices include Parent Power Hours, breakfast opportunities, and an exercise program at school with the family which all demand administrative support to implement.

Administrators can offer “Parent Power Hours,” designed to teach families how to help their students in all facets of their early academic career, would provide a link to meeting the need of positive experiences and home school partnerships. Teams of teachers present a lesson
exposing families to specific academic content (such as math and one-to-one correspondence), a

game (such as math bingo), and a time for a question and answer period, as well as on-the-spot

conferences. Supplementing the work of teachers would be administrators, who could answer

colors regarding general school operations and other factors influencing student performance

outside the classroom but within the school. Constantino (2008) suggested that such one-stop

shopping events give families a chance to understand learning expectations and meet teachers

while giving teachers a chance to meet and get to know families.

In the same way that power hours invite families into the home, administrators can open

the school to parents in the morning. This time could be used so that parents could have breakfast

with their child or to participate in an early morning walk or gym activity. Often at these events,

there is an opportunity for parents and their child to complete an activity that reinforces what is

learned during the day thus giving the parent an opportunity to practice it before supporting the

student at home. These events present opportunities for administrators to support teachers in their

quest to understand and partner with families by extending community time (as opposed to

classroom learning time). Additionally, administrators might use professional development to

discuss how best to connect with families and collaborate on ways in which the staff can make

best use of limited time and resources to make those connections valuable.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study presented several avenues for future research. The questions

answered during this study were responded to by a small set of participants representing only a

single school. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who best matched pre-
established criteria by the researchers. These criteria required that the participants be state-
licensed in Massachusetts; hold preliminary, initial or professional licenses; and work at a public,
urban preschool in the state. The research did not examine instructors at a rural preschool or suburban preschool. Neither was the school chosen a private institution. Future studies could investigate any of these specific areas.

**General Suggestions**

Larger samples of teachers can be studied to examine whether the reporting of this study is consistent across larger samples of instructors from similar public, urban preschools. It may also reveal additional insights that were not uncovered during this study. Expanding the number of participants in addition to schools may determine if these insights are consistent or contradictory across a variety of settings. Participants may be separated by the type of licenses they held, whether preliminary, initial, or professional. This may reveal different experiences depending on licensure. Such studies may also consider gender.

Moving past the public, urban school setting, future studies may also take into account schools from suburban and rural settings. Different settings may include different challenges. In highly rural areas, factors such as distance may arise that complicate the ability of teachers to engage in home visitations. Differences in setting may help to reveal themes that are consistent across settings and, conversely, themes that are unique to particular regional settings. Studies may find themes that are consistent across both public and private schools, as well as present themes that are unique to private schools.

Future research could include a shift away from the teacher’s role in attempting to make these connections and toward the parental experience. This research might focus on describing what interferes with or discourages parental participation. Research might also include determining best practices for bridging the gap between classroom and home.
Future Research Suggestions Specific to Themes

There were a number of themes that were revealed in this study, some of which confirmed previous themes in the literature, and some which were novel to this study. As such, this section breaks down recommendations for future research by theme. There are several avenues open for future exploration that can explore themes ranging from attitudes toward collaboration to the impact of administrative styles on parent-teacher relationships.

**Disconnected by Differences.** This study revealed that differences between parents and teachers were sometimes a problem of effectively communicating. This inability to communicate arose from language barriers that made it difficult for even simple messages to be sent home. Respondents in this study restricted their answers to general responses about the difficulty of working with parents. Future research could examine how this specifically impacts home visits, parental views of messages sent home, parental desire to connect with teachers given the language barrier, and methods by which teachers attempt to overcome these language barriers. Research into this area could look at the most effective means by which to deliver instruction and home messages to parents even in the presence of this barrier. Finally, research into school-supported programs that help support families and teachers navigate through these differences could also be conducted. Administrative attitudes were revealed to impact risk-taking among teachers, but programs implemented by administration could also have a real impact on the ability for teachers to connect with parents for whom English is a second language.

**Connected through Empathy.** Teachers within this study understood the importance of ensuring that all stakeholders recognize their role in safeguarding a child’s success in school and felt compelled to motivate parents to take part in helping their children become successful. Research into schools in surrounding areas could assess whether this attitude held among other
teachers within the state before expanding to observe attitudes of this nature at the national level. How these attitudes toward collaboration are impacted by school-level differences, including funding, administrative support, and training, could all be considered in future studies. There is also room for exploring how different programs affects the sense among teachers that they should collaborate with parents. An additional study might focus on differences in attitudes that have a real impact on whether teachers value the role of parents in the parent-teacher relationship.

Teachers initiated actions that helped connect them with parents. Respondents within this study initiated these relationships by making phone calls early in the year or taking advantage of family days that brought teachers and parents together. Future research into this area could focus on parent-teacher relationships with specific focus on whether teachers from other schools also began relationships early and in what ways do these relationships take shape. Such studies could also focus on examining the methods that teachers used to connect with parents. Another focus area might be to examine what makes for the most effective means of early communication. How teachers feel emboldened to make these early initiating actions could also be examined, with particular emphasis on assessing how administrative attitudes and training influence teacher desire to start relationships early. How these elements create a sense of urgency in teachers to begin early initiating actions could be explored. Lastly, exploring the effectiveness of these practices or the perceptions of these practices by the parent could further the existing body of research.

Teachers within this study attempted to make connections with parents in environments that were conducive to creating relationships. These climates were often teacher created. A study could explore the impact of teacher created versus parent or administrative created programs.
Teachers demonstrated attitudes that were welcoming toward parents and made it known that they were available frequently. Whether teachers in other regions demonstrate this type of behavior could be examined. This could be explored in other schools. The influence of training on whether teachers feel this impulse could also be examined. How teachers create this rapport could be explored. While teachers in this study explained how they generated rapport from an attitude perspective, future studies could also examine concrete means by which this was accomplished.

**Comradery through Shared Experience.** Teachers in this study felt the need to bridge the home and classroom environment in such a way that it made those two environments more closely tied. Greater parental participation was encouraged in both the home and the classroom by the teacher. The teachers explained a number of ways they attempted to do this, in some cases by asking families to donate items from the home for use in the classroom, and at other times encouraging parental presence on campus. Future study into this area could examine how teachers attempted to do this in other school settings, as well as examine how a number of background factors, including ethnicity and socioeconomics, influence not only teacher initiated actions that encouraged parental participation, but also how parents responded to these requests.

**Security from Administrative Support.** Teachers within this study demonstrated confidence in the school’s attempts to create bonds with parents and their own initiated actions because of supportive attitudes from administration. These attitudes helped encourage new approaches toward parent-teacher interaction. This manifested in many ways, such as the Thanksgiving Dinners held on campus, which brought together parents and teachers in a low-stress environment. The teachers in this study also specifically contrasted their experiences with the current administration to the actions of the previous administration, and they noted that
administrators had a perceived impact on the ability for teachers to outreach. Whether this holds true within other schools could be explored. The influence that administrators have on teachers’ perceived sense that they can take innovative approaches toward creating parent-teacher relationships might also lead to a research study. Future research could address the administrative leadership styles and the characteristics that administrators possess that best encourage teacher risk-taking when attempting to create home school partnerships.

These are all areas for future research that could examine how administrator attitudes manifest in real ways among schools, as well as examine how administrator attitudes affective perceptions among teachers themselves. If participants in this study could make a contrast within their school between the current administration and previous administration, there is a significant possibility that differences in administrative styles can be observed between different schools, and the impact of those styles on parent-teacher relationships documented.

Conclusion

This study was based upon an interpretative phenomenological analysis utilizing semi-structured interviews of licensed preschool educators in an urban elementary school in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. A number of major themes emerged from these interviews: (a) Disconnected by Differences, (b) Connected through Empathy, (c) Comradery through Shared Experience, and (d) Security from Administrative Support. These themes reinforced previous findings regarding the importance that teachers place on the home school partnerships, and communicated frustrations that arise when obstacles arise to such connections. The research findings further underscore that educators place a value on finding ways to bridge communication gaps between home and school. Teachers in this study went to great lengths in order to create these bridges but were not always successful and were more likely to make
creative attempts to engage when the administration was supportive. This study reflects positively on the efforts of educators and their willingness to foster stronger connections with parents. A passion for the partnership bond must exist if any relationship is to be made, particularly given the number of professional challenges that teachers face when attempting to create home-school partnerships.
References


http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB11_ParentInvolvement08.pdf


http://www.neafoundation.org/content/assets/2012/03/pthv-full-issue-brief-5.pdf


School-family partnerships: Dimensions and recommendations. In E. N. Patrikakou, R. P.
Weissberg, S. Redding, & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), School-family Partnerships for

education what we know, how public policy is or is not aligned with the evidence base,
and what we need to know. Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 10(2), 49-88.

Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. (2014). Data atlas by neighborhood: City of Springfield,
MA. Retrieved from

Ponterotto, J. G. (2005). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: a primer on research

Impact Study: First year findings. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and
Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

20-23.

Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

intervention on education and crime. Journal of the American Medical Association,
285(18), 2339-2346.


Appendix A: Letter from District Approving Research Work and Access to District Personnel

SPRINGFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS - SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

Paul Foster
Chief Information Officer
fosterc@spso.spfspringfield.ma.us
Tel. 413.787.7125
Fax 413.787.7609

May 6, 2015

Ms. Elizabeth Bienia

Dear Ms. Bienia,

Thank you for your request to conduct research on How Preschool Teachers Make Sense of Their Role in Home-School Partnerships. Your research request has been approved; however as a condition of approval, we will need the signed IRB letter of approval, and a copy of your informed consent form.

Please be advised that no changes in scope (e.g., timeframe of study, number of schools included, number of participants, etc.), procedure, or instrumentation may be made without authorization once a letter of approval has been issued. Requests for amendments must be made directly to the Administrator of the Digital Learning and Assessment Department.

We wish you continued success in your research and thank you for your interest in Springfield Public Schools.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Paul Foster
Chief Information Officer
Appendix B: Letter to Principal

September 20, 2015

Dear Principal,

I am contacting you to respectfully request your participation in a doctoral dissertation research project. I am currently completing an Ed. D. in Educational Leadership and Curriculum Development through Northeastern University in Boston, MA. The purpose of this doctoral research is to understand how teachers make sense of their role in home school partnerships. The research will consist of an interpretive phenomenological analysis through which teachers will share their stories of how school and home connections have been made and if they have made a difference in the education of the student.

This study will involve 8-10 public preschool teachers all representing an urban location in western Massachusetts. The teachers will be interviewed in his or her professional capacity. Data will be gathered through one personal interview, which will be digitally recorded. Each interview will last approximately sixty to ninety minutes. If needed, a phone conversation may take place at a later date to ask for clarity of information.

The research presents no known risks to the respondents or to their departments. Results of this research will support students, teachers and school administrators with the overall development and implementation of effective and positive measures to enhance the connection between home and school. Additionally, the benefits of a connection between home and school may ensure a positive academic future for students. An argument can be made that the connection between home and school makes a powerful long term difference in the educational life of students.

Your approval to conduct this study would be greatly appreciated. I would like to schedule a meeting to follow-up with you and answer any questions or concerns you many have. Please feel free to contact me via email bienia.e@XXX or cell phone (XXX-XXX-XXXX).

Sincerely yours,

Elizabeth J. Bienia
Appendix C: Letter to Participants

Teacher:

September 1, 2015

Dear Participant,

I am contacting you to respectfully request your participation in a doctoral dissertation research project. I am currently completing an Ed. D. in Educational Leadership and Curriculum Development through Northeastern University in Boston, MA. The purpose of this doctoral research is to understand how teachers make sense of their role in home school partnerships. The research will consist of an interpretative phenomenological analysis through which teachers will share their stories of how school and home partnerships have been made and what that experience was like for you, the participant.

This study will involve 8-10 public preschool teachers all representing an urban location in western Massachusetts. The teachers will be interviewed in his or her professional capacity. Data will be gathered through one personal interview, which will be digitally recorded. Each interview will last approximately sixty to ninety minutes. If needed, a phone conversation may take place at a later date to ask for clarity of information.

The research presents no known risks to the respondents or to their departments. Results of this research will support students, teachers and school administrators with the overall development and implementation of effective and positive measures to enhance the connection between home and school. Additionally, the benefits of a connection between home and school may ensure a positive academic future for students. An argument can be made that the connection between home and school makes a powerful long term difference in the educational life of students.

Your approval to participate in this study would be greatly appreciated. Please contact me if you would like to volunteer to participate in this study; I will not contact you again. Please feel free to contact me via email bienia.e@XXX or cell phone (XXX-XXX-XXXX).

Sincerely yours,

Elizabeth J. Bienia
Attachment D: Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University: Department Educational Leadership

Investigator Name: Principal Investigator, Tova Sanders; Student Researcher, Elizabeth J. Bienia

Title of Project:
PRESCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS: HOW PRESCHOOL TEACHERS MAKE SENSE OF THEIR EXPERIENCES WITHIN AN INTEGRATED SETTING

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
You have been invited 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 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?
You are being asked to participate in this study because of your role as an urban public preschool teacher.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to understand how preschool teachers make sense of their role in home school partnerships within an integrated classroom.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in one 60 to 90-minute interview. The interview will be conducted exclusively by the researcher and will consist of open-ended questions that will allow for you to expand or provide further explanations.

Where will this take place and how much time will it take?
The interview will take place in a convenient location and time that you select. The interview will be recorded by a digital recording device with a lapel microphone. Once all interviews are completed their may be a request to have one more follow-up interview that would not last more than 30 minutes in length and may be completed by phone.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There will be no risk or discomfort to the participants.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There are no direct benefits for participants. Results of this research may support students, teachers and school administrators in understanding how teachers engage in home school partnerships.

Who will see the information about me?
The study will be confidential. Only the researcher on this study will see the information about the participant. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way. Interviews will be conducted by the researcher and transcribed by an outside source. Your identity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms which will be given prior to the first interview. This method ensures both the confidentiality of the participants as well as the security protocol for storage and management of all data. All data, including written notes, recorded interviews, and transcribed interviews, will be copied and stored with a pass code in two different locations. Saved interview transcriptions will be downloaded into coding software to allow for further analysis and coding. All data will be erased after the study has concluded and all signed consent forms will be retained for 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 ensure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as Northeastern University 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 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. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee of the college.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
Dr. Tova Sanders, Principal Investigator

Elizabeth Bienia, Lead Researcher

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University Boston, MA 02115 tel. 617-373-7570, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
There is no financial benefit provided to participate in this research.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
There is no cost to participate in this research.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**
Participants will be included in the study providing anonymous participant descriptions that will be based on your interview. Each description will be provided to the participant before it is placed into the final study.
The researcher is a principal in the same district as the participants however not at the same school.

By signing on the line below, you agree to take part in the research study as it has been explained and outlined in this document.

__________________________________________       _____________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part              Date

________________________________________________
Printed name of person above

__________________________________________       _____________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the    Date
Participant above and obtained consent

________________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Institution: Northeastern University

Interviewee (Title and Name): _____________________________________________________

Interviewer: Elizabeth J Bienia, Doctoral Candidate

Date: ________________________________

Location of Interview: __________________________

Principal Experience Interviews

Part I:

Informed Consent Form: review and sign

Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about your experience engaging in home school partnerships. My research project focuses on the experience of teachers with a particular interest in understanding the experience of the teacher. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into the specific ways in which teacher’s partner with families thus broadening the current body of research.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. The interviews will be transcribed by a professional who will only know you as participant X (or other such letter). To meet our human subjects requirement at the university, you must sign the form in front of you. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form?

We have planned this interview to last approximately 90 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. Do you have any questions at this time?

Introduction

A. Interviewee Background
Q1) How long have you been a preschool teacher?

Follow-up: And how long at this particular school?

Q2) Can you tell me about your background?

Follow-up: Would you like to add anything else?

Q3) Can you describe the school in which you work and why you teach there vs another school?

Part II: Objectives: Obtain the participant’s insights, in his/her own words, into the experiences while engaging in home school partnerships.

Prefatory Statement: I would like to hear about your experiences as a teacher who engages in home school partnerships. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences that you encountered during your time working in the preschool and your perspective at various times.

Q1) Describe how you think about home school partnerships?

Prompt: Describe the process you use to think about partnerships.

Q2) Describe what would a home school partnership looks like?

Prompt: Provide an example of a partnership between you and a family you have previously worked with.

Q3) Describe how a home school partnership feels?

Prompt: Describe the way you might feel about entering a partnership.

Q4) Describe a specific action you have taken to create home school partnerships?

Follow-up: Can you describe other actions you have taken?

Q5) Describe the strongest home school partnership you had and what it was like for you.

Prompt: Describe a fulfilling partnership.

Follow-up: Is there anything else you would like to add about that partnership?

Q6) Tell me about a time when you were unable to establish a home school partnership.

Prompt: Describe a situation where you were not able to make a connection or the partnership did not go as planned.
Follow-up: Can you attribute the lack of connection to anything specific?

Follow-up: Is there anything else you would like to add about that partnership?

Q7) Thinking back over time from when you first began at the preschool to now, describe how you have changed your thoughts about how you engage in home school partnerships.

Q8) Describe how your school environment impacts home school partnerships?

Prompt: Classroom vs whole school?

Q9) Describe how your school supports home school partnerships?

CONCLUSION:

Thank you very much for coming. Your time is greatly appreciated and your comments have been very helpful. The results of this research will provide useful information to broaden the discussion regarding home school partnerships.

You will be kept anonymous during all phases of this study including any experimental writings, published or not. As stated in the disclosure document, there will be participant profiles crafted for the final study but each participant will have an opportunity to review their profile to make sure it is correct. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at any time, all my contact information is included in the consent forms that you have copies of.

INTERVIEWER REFLECTION:
Please describe the respondent’s attitude toward you and the interview:

Please describe any unusual circumstances and/or events that had any bearing on the interview such as interruptions, language difficulty, etc.:

Please describe anything else that happened during the interview that has any bearings on the study’s objectives:

Additional comments:
Appendix F: Request for Confidentiality Transcription

Confidentiality Agreement: Transcriptionist

I, Cheryl Brown, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentations received from (researcher’s name) related to his/her research study on the researcher study titled

Furthermore, I agree:
1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents.
2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized titles of the transcribed interviews texts, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher, (name of researcher).
3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession.
4. To return all audiotapes and study-related materials to (researcher’s name) in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any back-up devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally responsible for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Cheryl Brown
Transcriber’s name (printed)
October 19, 2015
Date

[Signature]
Transcriber’s signature
October 19, 2015
Date