AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF FAMILY–SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS IN AN URBAN DISTRICT

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how parents of middle school students in an urban district in Massachusetts perceived their experiences creating relationships with their children’s school. This qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis explored the experiences of parents as they attempted to become directly and actively involved in their children’s education, and their perceptions of the factors that either encouraged or inhibited their involvement. Epstein’s family–school–community partnerships framework guided the study. The researcher aimed to answer the following research question: What are the experiences of families of youth attending a middle school in an urban school district in central Massachusetts in forming and sustaining family–school partnerships to enhance their involvement in their children’s education? Major findings outlined are: families experienced school communication efforts that were ineffective and limited in scope; families experienced difficulties when providing mathematical assistance within the home; families desired more direct access to school personnel; families encountered barriers which prevented them from participating in school-based opportunities for involvement; families experienced a range of interpersonal connections, which affected their level of comfort with the school. Recommendations for practice are shared and suggest that school personnel develop a strategic plan to address the factors that impede the establishment of family–school partnerships.

Key words: family–school partnerships, middle school, Epstein’s family–school–community partnerships framework
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of my past, present, and future students and their families.
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I would like to thank my family for all of their support. You have always taken an interest in my ideas and have been willing to engage in countless conversations about my work. Your feedback and encouragement were invaluable. I cannot possibly convey the level of gratitude I have for the assistance you have provided.

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But if I were you, I would appeal to God; I would lay my cause before him. He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.

Job 5:8-9
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 8
Problem................................................................................................................................................... 8
Significance ........................................................................................................................................... 10
Positionality .......................................................................................................................................... 14
Research Question ................................................................................................................................. 16
Theoretical Framework .......................................................................................................................... 17
    Type 1: Parenting .......................................................................................................................... 18
    Type 2: Communicating ................................................................................................................ 19
    Type 3: Volunteering ..................................................................................................................... 19
    Type 4: Learning at Home ............................................................................................................. 19
    Type 5: Decision Making .............................................................................................................. 20
    Type 6: Collaborating with the Community .................................................................................. 20
Family–School Partnerships Defined ................................................................................................... 22
Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................................................... 23
History of Family–School Partnerships ................................................................................................. 23
Barriers to Establishing Family–School Partnerships ........................................................................ 31
    Barriers to Communication ........................................................................................................ 31
    Cultural Barriers ........................................................................................................................ 33
    Socioeconomic Barriers ............................................................................................................. 35
    School Climate Barriers .............................................................................................................. 36
Strategies for Establishing Family–School Partnerships ................................................................. 40
    Strategies for Overcoming Barriers to Communication ............................................................. 41
    Strategies for Overcoming Cultural Barriers .............................................................................. 41
    Strategies for Overcoming Socioeconomic Barriers .................................................................. 45
    Strategies for Overcoming School Climate Barriers .................................................................. 46
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................ 48
Chapter 3: Methodology ....................................................................................................................... 50
Research Question ............................................................................................................................... 50
Research Design: Qualitative Research ................................................................................................ 51
Research Tradition ................................................................................................................................ 51
Context ................................................................................................................................................. 54
Participants ........................................................................................................................................... 55
Recruitment and Access ....................................................................................................................... 57
Data Collection ..................................................................................................................................... 59
Storage and Management ..................................................................................................................... 59
Data Analysis ........................................................................................................................................ 60
Trustworthiness .................................................................................................................................... 60
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis ......................................................................................................... 63
Participants ........................................................................................................................................... 63
   Alisha ............................................................................................................................................. 63
   Jennifer .......................................................................................................................................... 63
   Elizabeth ........................................................................................................................................ 64
   Nina ............................................................................................................................................... 64
   Juliana ............................................................................................................................................ 65
   Anne Marie .................................................................................................................................... 65
   Diana ............................................................................................................................................. 66
   Sandy ............................................................................................................................................. 66
   Katrina ........................................................................................................................................... 67
Themes ................................................................................................................................................. 67
   Families Experienced School Communication Efforts That Were Ineffective and Limited in Scope ................................................................................................................................. 67
   Families Experienced Difficulties When Providing Mathematical Assistance Within the Home 72
   Families Desired More Direct Access to School Personnel .......................................................... 74
   Families Encountered Barriers Which Prevented Them from Participating in School-Based Opportunities for Involvement .............................................................................................. 79
   Families Experienced a Range of Interpersonal Connections, Which Affected Their Level of Comfort with the School ................................................................................................ 84
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................ 91
Chapter 5: Implications and Discussion

Discussion of Major Findings

Families Experienced School Communication Efforts That Were Ineffective and Limited in Scope

Families Experienced Difficulties When Providing Mathematical Assistance Within the Home

Families Desired More Direct Access to School Personnel

Families Encountered Barriers Which Prevented Them from Participating in School-Based Opportunities for Involvement

Families Experienced a Range of Interpersonal Connections, Which Affected Their Level of Comfort with the School

Relating Findings to the Theoretical Framework

Type 1: Parenting

Type 2: Communicating

Type 3: Volunteering

Type 4: Learning at Home

Type 5: Decision Making

Type 6: Collaborating with the Community

Relating Findings to the Literature

Implications

Limitations

Future Research

Conclusion

Personal Reflection

References

Appendix A: Permission Letter

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyers English and Spanish

Appendix C: Recruitment Letters English and Spanish

Appendix D: Signed Informed Consent Form English, Spanish, and Portuguese

Appendix E: Interview Questions and Protocol
Chapter 1: Introduction

The direct relationship between the establishment of family–school partnerships and students’ academic success has been well documented (Epstein, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Kraft & Rogers, 2015; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). However, there is a marked decline in family–school partnerships as students move through middle school (Epstein, 2010). The problem is especially prevalent in urban settings, where a variety of barriers impede the establishment of family–school partnerships (Williams & Sanchez, 2011). Families from traditionally marginalized groups have consistently reported feeling a sense of isolation from their children’s schools (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; Yull, Blitz, Thompson, & Murray, 2014).

The purpose of this research was to understand how parents of middle school students in an urban district in Massachusetts perceived their experiences creating relationships with their children’s school. This qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) explored the experiences of parents as they attempted to become directly and actively involved in their children’s education, and their perceptions of the factors that either encouraged or inhibited their involvement. The perspectives shared by parents provided insights into how these stakeholders have or have not been successful in overcoming the challenges that are often associated with establishing family–school partnerships at the middle school level.

Problem

Early adolescence is a time during which children experience hormonal, physical, and social changes (Gilmore & Meersand, 2015). These changes can lead to increased instances of mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and self-harm (Hawton & James, 2005; Michaud & Fombonne, 2005). Engagement in risky behavior can also increase during this time (Gilmore & Meersand, 2015; Noller & Atkin, 2014). A decline in school engagement and academic achievement
over the course of middle school has also been observed (McGill, Hughes, Alicea, Way, & Eccles, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2013). During this vulnerable time in students’ lives, relationships between students, parents, and teachers change. Scholars have noted that parents’ involvement in their children’s education typically decreases as students age (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Epstein, 2010; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler, & Harris, 2007). This decrease can be attributed, in part, to middle school students’ increased desire for independence (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Hill, Witherspoon, & Bartz, 2018). It is also during this period that children’s school work becomes more challenging. Consequently, some parents believe that they are less able to provide assistance; this can prevent parents from initiating engagement with their children’s schools (Downer & Meyers, 2010). Moreover, as students grow older, teachers perceive that students need less assistance and that fewer programs are needed within schools to support family–school partnership formation (Downer & Meyers 2010; Jeynes, 2012).

The structure of middle school further complicates the creation of family–school partnerships. Middle schools are typically larger than elementary schools, and students have more teachers during the day than they had previously (Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014). This means that parents have more teachers with whom to build relationships and teachers have many families with whom they need to connect.

There are a number of other barriers, which lead to strained or nonexistent relationships between parents and their children’s teachers. Some parents report feeling generally uncomfortable in their children’s schools because of various elements of a school’s culture and climate (Luet, 2017; Murray et al., 2014; Williams, Sánchez, & Hunnell, 2011). Parents are hesitant to engage with schools that they perceive are unsafe, disorganized, and/or demonstrate a lack of respect for students and parents (Goldkind & Farmer, 2013; Luet, 2017; Murray et al., 2014). Additionally, parents’ low
socioeconomic status and/or lack of familiarity with the English language may further isolate them from their children’s schools, especially when they perceive that these factors are causing them to be stigmatized or dismissed by school personnel (Yoder & Lopez, 2013; Luet, 2017; Turney & Kao, 2009).

This IPA closely examined parents’ perceptions of the barriers which prevent relationships between parents and school personnel from flourishing while also uncovering those aspects that lead to successful partnerships and thus deserve greater attention. This information can help parents of middle school youth in urban communities in the United States identify effective strategies for involvement in their children’s education and better equip school personnel to amend current practices in an effort to facilitate stronger relationships with parents that enhance their involvement and ultimately improve academic outcomes for students.

**Significance**

When students transition to middle school, they are thrust into a new world, one marked by “a sudden decline in teacher support, a dizzying array of choices and academic classes, and exposure to potentially risky older teens” (Gilmore & Meersand, 2015, p. 137). It is not surprising that as students navigate these new surroundings, many experience a decline in academic performance (McGill et al., 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Exploring opportunities to strengthen family–school partnerships at the middle school level is significant because strong partnerships have been documented to guide students effectively towards achieving greater academic success. When teachers and parents are in frequent positive or negative communication about students’ progress, urban middle school students have demonstrated improved homework completion, better classroom behavior, and increased class participation—elements which translate to greater scholastic gains (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).
Before teachers can observe these academic changes, however, they must understand how to effectively engage parents. Researchers have asserted that parents are more likely to become involved in their children’s education when they feel supported by and satisfied with the schools their children attend (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2016; Jeynes, 2012). Better relationships between parents and teachers lead to two-way channels of communication which help parents “gain knowledge, practice, and confidence to help them provide effective supports for their children’s learning” (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2016, p. 13).

Studies have documented a number of ways in which parents’ involvement in their children’s learning during middle school helps students maneuver around obstacles which have the potential to derail their academic growth. In early adolescence, research has indicated that students become more concerned with social relationships and are preoccupied with how they compare to their peers (Gilmore & Meersand, 2015). In this context, parents have the potential to help students to view themselves and school in a more positive way, which increases self-esteem and helps students to feel more invested in their education (Lam & Ducreux, 2013; Wang et al., 2014). The messages parents convey to students about the importance of school and their expectations for academic success also contribute to improved academic outcomes for students (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016; Flores de Apodaca et al., 2015; Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Lam & Ducreux, 2013). When parents help students to see the ways in which what they are learning in middle school connects to their future, they commonly sense a greater purpose for what they are learning (Wang et al., 2014). Strong familial relationships have been linked to the prevention and decrease of problem behavior for middle school students (Fosco, Stormshak, Dishion, & Winter, 2012; Wang et al., 2014). Subsequently, improved behavior has been correlated with higher grades and greater academic competence (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016).
Determining how to foster academic success at the middle school level through the use of family–school partnerships is also significant because of the implications for students’ long-term success. The habits, attitudes, and skills students develop in middle school have been determined to be major predictors of high school completion (Rumberger, 2011). Students who are frequently absent, get in trouble often, and struggle academically while in middle school are at a greater risk of dropping out of high school (McKee & Caldarella, 2016; Rumberger, 2011). In addition, students are more likely to dropout when they have low educational and occupational aspirations (Rumberger, 2011). This can, in part, be overcome by the messages parents and teachers send to students, which increase their motivation and improve their outlook on school (Ricard & Pelletier, 2016; Strom & Boster, 2011). When these messages are bolstered by strong parental involvement in the education of youth at school and at home by providing emotional support, guidance, and supervision, dropout rates decrease even more significantly (Rumberger, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative to invite and maintain parents’ involvement in their children’s education prior to students’ entrance into high school.

On a broader scale, dropping out of high school has negative consequences that affect individuals, society, and the economy. Based on a national survey, “Dropouts were two times more likely to report attempting suicide than their counterparts who graduated from high school” (Maynard, Salas-Wright, & Vaughn, 2015, p. 296). In addition, the researchers reported that, “high school dropouts were found to be two to three times more likely to have been arrested for larceny, assault, and drug possession or sales than their high school graduate counterparts” (Maynard et al., 2015, p. 296). This suggests that dropping out of high school can have negative implication for individuals’ quality of life while also placing additional economic burdens on society (Rumberger, 2011). In 2016, 48% of individuals ages 20–24 who did not complete high school were employed
full time in comparison to 69% of individuals of the same age who completed high school (National Council for Educational Statistics, 2018). In 2015, individuals ages 25–34 who did not complete high school earned a median income of $25,000 (National Council for Educational Statistics, 2018). Individuals of the same age who completed high school earned a median income of $30,500, and those who earned a bachelor’s degree earned a median income of $50,000 (National Council for Educational Statistics, 2018). The lower wages and higher unemployment rates that are associated with dropping out of high school translate to lower tax revenue that could be used to revitalize local communities (Rumberger, 2011).

In light of the host of benefits of strong family–school partnerships combined with the negative effects on academic performance and related lifelong effects of poor family–school partnerships, the importance of ongoing studies on the formation of these relationships cannot be overstated. Conducting this study was particularly significant because no examination of these relationships can be successful without a comprehensive appreciation and understanding of the challenges parents face in supporting their children’s education, directly from their experiences and vantage point. This study built on the findings of other studies identifying barriers to parental involvement and solutions for breaking those barriers down in the urban middle school context to improve programs and outreach so they respond effectively to parents’ needs. Hill et al. (2018) acknowledged that while “research on family–school engagement and parental involvement in education has increased exponentially over the last two to three decades . . . there remains a need for research to expand our conceptualizations especially as they apply to middle school” (p. 12). This study aimed to fill this identified gap in the literature.

This study differed from other studies conducted in the past due to the context in which it took place. This study came at a time during which a number of demographic, political, and school
funding changes occurred in the United States. The change in administration and leadership of the U.S. Department of Education resulted in a shifting of priorities which may impact stakeholder perceptions (Kamenetz, 2017). Rhetoric surrounding race, religious affiliation, and immigration status has caused some families to feel like unwelcome members of their communities, including the school environment (Goodman, 2017; Wells, 2017). These contextual factors have the potential to impact the dynamics of participation of the parents who already face challenges to involvement from the context of the home and school environment.

**Positionality**

My interest in the topic of fostering family–school partnerships stems from my professional experiences. Because I have a personal attachment to this research, it means that my work has the potential to be greatly influenced by the opinions and biases that I have developed (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). As a scholar–practitioner, it is my duty to examine those forces which have the potential to influence the way I conduct and interpret my research.

When I began teaching, I realized the importance of creating partnerships with families because of the benefits students experienced through the collaboration between these two important stakeholders in their lives. Through my professional experiences, I also learned that, due to a variety of factors, these partnerships are not always easily established. As I observed teachers and administrators frequently expressing their frustrations about the lack of partnerships that existed within the school, I began to wonder what could be done to improve connections between families and school personnel.

Admittedly, prior to becoming a teacher, I took family–school partnerships for granted. I attended a small, private school from first through eighth grade. All of the students and their families who attended this school spoke English as their first language. This meant that parents and teachers
were able to easily communicate. In addition, the majority of the parents had the means necessary to afford transportation to attend school events. Consequently, during my elementary school years, I saw many examples of strong family–school partnerships. I began to attribute any lack of family–school partnerships to parents choosing not to become involved in their children’s education.

There are some parents who have become voluntarily disengaged from their parenting responsibilities, but I realize now that there are many parents who have high educational aspirations for their children, but face barriers that impede the formation of family–school partnerships. These barriers include, but are not limited to, differences in language, parental jobs that have inflexible schedules, and a lack of knowledge of the U.S. education system (Garcia Coll et al., 2002). By simply blaming parents and not considering these factors, I was preventing myself from considering possible solutions to solve the problem of strained or nonexistent family–school partnerships.

There are different emotions that I attach to this topic. The main emotion I feel is frustration. I feel frustrated that there are strained relationships between families and staff members where I work. Because I feel frustrated and because I decided to investigate this topic for my research, it is a project that I take great pride in and to which I have developed an emotional attachment. This could have led me to exaggerate claims or carefully select only the data that supported my position, causing me to potentially overlook or ignore ideas that could have given me a more complete picture of the problem and its solutions.

I have had encounters with parents that are upsetting. I have had parents, that even when barriers are removed, do not attend scheduled meetings. But it was important for me not to take these few circumstances and make generalizations about the intentions of all parents. It is sometimes easy to make assumptions about parents because of my experiences as a student and as a teacher. My parents never faced any barriers when forming relationships with my teachers. My parents never
dealt with the negative experiences that some parents in urban areas report facing in which they were stereotyped and mistreated, leading to distrust of school personnel (Williams et al., 2011). I sometimes take my understanding of the world and apply it to new situations, which can cause me to overlook the views of others. This is common, as Lee, Eckrich, Lackey, and Showalter (2010) explained; many in-service teachers fall into this trend. They describe this as one transplanting his or her own “cultural map on to a new environment” (Lee et al., 2010, p. 102), which can lead to misunderstandings of cultural behavior. As a scholar, I committed myself to addressing these issues. The first step was to be cognizant that they existed. I worked hard to deliver a rigorous study with the highest level of balance and objectivity.

I interviewed parents from the district in which I work. Parents shared personal information with me. How I interpreted the information that was provided to me could have been shaped by my biases and assumptions. I took great care to ensure that I did not misinterpret the other and apply my own cultural map onto someone else’s ideas causing me to alter the true meaning of their words (Briscoe, 2005). Because I worked within the setting in which my study took place, I made an effort to ensure that I acknowledged and put aside my previous experiences so that I could report the facts as they emerged through data collection and not through preconceived perceptions of my place of employment.

**Research Question**

What are the experiences of families of youth attending a middle school in an urban school district in central Massachusetts in forming and sustaining family–school partnerships to enhance their involvement in their children’s education?
Theoretical Framework

Epstein (2010) developed the family–school–community partnerships framework for describing the interplay between these three factors in a student’s education and the resultant effects on academic performance. When Epstein (1988) began developing her theory, the prevailing thought at the time was that parents and teachers filled separate and distinct roles in children’s lives. Research focused either solely on what parents could do to enhance the academic success of their children or on how educators could better prepare students for success. Epstein posited that both parents and educators had equal and important roles to play in improving students’ academic endeavors. Her theory acknowledged the interdependence of these two forces. She explained that in order to cultivate parental involvement, whether at home or in the school building, educators must provide parents with encouragement and guidance. The kind of encouragement and guidance provided would depend on information provided by parents about their expectations and the needs of their children (Epstein, 2010). Epstein built on her initial framework by including a third aspect of the partnership – communities.

Communities, Epstein (2011) explained, provide families and schools with tools and resources to strengthen their relationships. Epstein coined the term overlapping spheres of influence to describe the partnership between these three external structures in students’ lives. Within this model, students are at the center, and their academic growth and development is shaped by these three overlapping spheres. At the core of this framework is the proposition that, “In partnership, educators, families, and community members work together to share information, guide students, solve problems, and celebrate successes. Partnerships recognize the shared responsibilities of home, school, and community for children’s learning and development” (p. 4).
Within her framework, Epstein (2011) outlined six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Epstein conceded that not all types of involvement would occur simultaneously or apply uniformly across all schools with equal effect. She also acknowledged that there are challenges associated with each type of involvement, which must be grappled with when formulating a strategic plan for strengthening connections between home and school.

**Type 1: Parenting**

Parenting involves an exchange of information between families and educators in order to provide the most effective support for students’ academic growth at home and at school. Students can experience academic gains when they receive proper nutrition, discipline, and supervision at home. In turn, educators can support families in their endeavors by sharing information about topics such as youth development. Likewise, parents can share information with educators about their goals for their children, cultural practices, and parenting styles. This information will help educators to understand the unique contexts in which students exist, which is necessary when teachers are deciding how to best support students and their parents. Dissemination of information between families and schools can prove challenging with this type of involvement. Epstein (2011), therefore, recommends using traditional workshop models and harnessing the convenience of newer, technology-based forms of communication. As a result of Type 1 involvement, parents can gain greater confidence to provide assistance at home and engage with their children’s schools, and teachers can acquire greater understanding of the strengths and beliefs of the parents with whom they work.
Type 2: Communicating

Communicating refers to the development of systems that effectively relay information between school and home and vice versa. In other words, two-way channels of communication must be established. Of utmost importance to effective communication, Epstein (2011) asserts, is an understanding and accommodation of the diverse linguistic needs of families. Such accommodations allow schools to communicate with parents with greater ease and fosters confidence and comfort among parents in approaching school personnel with questions and ideas. Epstein emphasizes that communication should be ongoing, not limited to annual events such as back-to-school nights and parent conferences.

Type 3: Volunteering

Volunteering refers to opportunities for parents to provide assistance within the school and in other settings. Though Epstein (2011) recognized the benefits to schools and students when parents are able to provide physical assistance during school hours, she realized that various demands on families’ time prevents many families from engaging in Type 3 involvement. Volunteering, in Epstein’s framework, may occur at events that do not take place during school hours. Volunteering encompasses home- and community-based events which provide opportunities for parents to demonstrate to their children that they are supportive partners in their developmental success.

Type 4: Learning at Home

Learning at home refers to families assisting with homework and other learning activities, as well as helping their children with academic goal setting. Schools can assist families’ efforts by providing them with tools and resources to guide them when helping their children with homework. Epstein suggested that information about the curriculum, school policies, and teacher expectations for work completion be widely shared. Type 4 involvement gives parents a sense of greater awareness of
and inclusion in the day-to-day education of their children and provides them with the knowledge needed to make informed decisions about what is in the best interest of their children.

**Type 5: Decision Making**

Type 5 involvement opens schools’ decision-making process to parents. Schools should present parents with an array of opportunities to become involved in the life of the school, voice opinions about issues that are important to them, and advocate for their children. Epstein’s (2011) framework champions strategic efforts to include underrepresented groups on committees or school improvement teams. Parents who are willing to serve in leadership roles may provide a necessary bridge between the school and other parents in the community. The social connections many parents have already established and the expertise they have about other families in the community can be important sources of information for school leaders deciding how to improve family–school partnerships. Parent representatives can serve as liaisons for those parents who would like their voices to be heard during the decision-making process but either do not feel comfortable serving in official leadership roles or have other commitments, which prevent them from attending meetings or events.

**Type 6: Collaborating with the Community**

Finally, collaborating with the community refers to a school’s utilization of community resources to improve family–school partnership efforts. To foster Type 6 involvement, schools should identify and connect with local businesses, religious organizations, cultural centers, or similar groups, which they believe might provide insight to educators about the families with whom they are trying to connect. Community-based organizations can increase cultural capital among families and assist families with health care and childcare needs. Individuals within the community have potential resources to meet the needs of schools and families that would go unmet without such connections.
Critics of this framework assert that the “Epstein Model may not fully capture how parents are or want to be involved in their children’s education, indicating that new ways of working with parents in high-minority, high-poverty schools are warranted” (Bower & Griffin, 2011, p. 84). A noted limitation of Bower and Griffin’s (2011) study was a lack of inclusion of parents’ voices. The authors reported that teachers and administrators who participated in the study lamented continually low parental attendance at school functions and what they perceived to be unimproved parental involvement in home-based learning activities after adhering to the six types of involvement in the family–school–community partnerships framework. However, if parents’ perspectives had been included in the study, useful information about the kind of in-home support that may have been occurring as well as parents’ perceptions about the barriers to in-school involvement that may have existed and prevented greater in-school involvement may have provided additional insight as to the usefulness of this framework for increasing relationships between home and school. In a study which included inner-city parents’ perspectives, Dauber and Epstein (1993) discovered that, “The strongest and most consistent predictors of parent involvement at school and at home are the specific school programs and teacher practices that encourage and guide parent involvement” (p. 61). Epstein and Sheldon (2016) found that the quality of the family–school partnership programs and the degree of support provided from administration will impact the effectiveness of efforts to include parents in students’ education. In other words, the usefulness of this framework as a way to strengthen partnerships depends on the fidelity with which it is implemented.

Through the concept of the overlapping spheres of influence, Epstein (2011) recognizes that parents play an important role in influencing children’s growth and development. This concept aligns with the researcher’s decision to incorporate perspectives of this key group of stakeholders. Epstein’s six types of parental involvement were used to frame the analysis of this study.
Family–School Partnerships Defined

*Family–school partnerships* is a term used to describe different kinds of interactions that occur between the home sphere and the school sphere to enhance academic outcomes for students (Epstein, 2010). The connection between families and schools was traditionally defined simply as parents’ physical and visible involvement in activities occurring in the school building (Watson, Sanders-Lawson, & McNeal, 2012). However, the dynamic is more complex, and a comprehensive and universal definition is elusive. In this context, scholars have cautioned that, when defining family–school partnerships, it is important to not use parents’ attendance at school-based activities as the sole measure of involvement; parents can support children’s academic development in ways that may not be easily visible to school personnel (Park & Holloway, 2013). Parents can provide support for students through modeling, reinforcement, and direct instruction, which can occur within the school building or at home, and these too constitute parental involvement in a family–school partnership (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). A continuum can aid in more accurately defining family–school partnerships (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). This continuum is described as a “messy web of interactions” that can range from basic transmittal of information from the school to parents to more complex parental engagement in which parents support students’ learning in the home and are in close and frequent two-way communication with school personnel (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) provides further clarity for defining family–school partnerships, explaining that family–school partnerships should include opportunities for families and school personnel to jointly develop school policies designed to enhance future parental engagement and academic outcomes for students. For the purposes of this study, family–school partnerships are defined as connections between home and school that are made to collaboratively improve academic outcomes for students.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to explore scholarly research as it pertains to the establishment of family–school partnerships, particularly the key factors affecting their formation and maintenance. The literature is organized as follows. The first section analyzes the historical and political contexts which have influenced policies and practices associated with fostering greater connections between home and school. The second section examines the barriers which impact the establishment of family–school partnerships. The third section describes the strategies scholars suggest to more effectively establish family–school partnerships. The literature reviewed provides an historical context for the present study and identifies barriers and strategies for scholars and practitioners to consider when pursuing solutions for improving family–school partnerships, and consequently, students’ academic success.

History of Family–School Partnerships

The role parents have played in children’s education has changed over time. In order to understand the barriers impeding the establishment of family–school partnerships, one must first be aware of the philosophies, biases, and legislation that have influenced how people have perceived the connection between home and school. The definition and quality of family–school partnerships have transformed on numerous occasions since the inception of public education in the United States. Cultural philosophies, personal and societal biases, and federal legislation have all influenced the ways scholars and practitioners have understood family–school partnerships. Understanding how historical developments have shaped the state of family–school partnership formation is critical to framing contemporary challenges related to this topic.

Early in U.S. educational history, parents exercised a great deal of control over their children’s education, which occurred largely in the home (Hiatt-Michael, 2008). The establishment
of public schools grew out of concerns about the quality of the education children were receiving in an agrarian economy, in which many children labored long hours to support their families’ incomes. In the early 1900s, many families migrated to urban areas to seek more readily available industrial-based employment. The resultant and controversial inclusion of children in the industrial workforce prompted lawmakers to advocate for and pass compulsory school attendance and truancy laws, which, while they improved the well-being of countless children, also “reduced parental control over their children’s lives and education” (Hiatt-Michael, 2008, p. 48). During this period, the educational climate shifted from home-based schooling towards an emphasis on teachers as “expert educators,” which made some parents feel excluded from their children’s schools (Hiatt-Michael, 2008, p. 52).

The National Congress of Mothers, which would later become known as the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), opposed parents’ exclusion from schools and fought for schools to view parents as valuable contributors to the academic formation of their children (Watson et al., 2012, p. 42). The organization’s establishment in 1897 can be credited to an observation that “neither parents nor teachers were in touch with each other, and children suffered by lack of this mutual understanding” (Schoff, 1916, p. 139). As such, the PTA’s stated mission was to solve problems facing school children and the education system while ensuring that parents were not alienated from schools. The PTA’s early efforts to unite parents and teachers focused on the education of parents. Schoff (1916) outlined the original tenets of the PTA’s mission, which included giving “fathers and mothers the opportunity to better educate themselves for intelligent home-making and child-nurture” and enabling “parents to learn what the schools are doing in order that the home may offer effective cooperation and that the schools may also cooperate with the home” (p. 140). These sentiments represent some of the first examples of stakeholders advocating for parents and teachers to work as partners to ensure the educational success of children. Mandates requiring such partnerships in
American public schools would not appear in legislation until about 50 years later. During this early period, individuals did acknowledge the work parents completed in the home as an important form of parental involvement, but many educators measured parental involvement only in terms of the visible acts of attendance at school-based programs “such as parent conferences, PTA meeting, [and] fundraising events” (Watson et al., 2012, p. 42).

In the economic and political climate of the 1940s, the more traditional understanding of what it meant to be an involved parent was challenged. The massive draft and deployment of U.S. servicemen during World War II brought many women out of the domestic sphere and into the workforce to fill positions previously held by men who were fighting abroad (Cardinali, 2002). Although it took time for postwar society to adjust to mothers joining the workforce, in their new positions, women demonstrated their capabilities as viable employees, catalyzing an era in which, “working mothers became the norm rather than the exception” (Peterson & Miller, 1987, p. 31). An increased prevalence of two-parent working households in the decades to follow created a growing need for educators to find innovative ways to engage families, a trend that would later be addressed in educational legislation.

When World War II ended, the national focus turned from international to domestic concerns. Through activism and legal action during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Americans began seeking and securing greater equality in education. Foremost among the victories of this period for equal education was the opinion delivered by the U.S. Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. The court’s decision, which ruled the doctrine of separate but equal schools for Black and White students unconstitutional, increased equity and opportunity while also presenting new challenges to family–school partnership efforts. In Brown’s wake, schools and by extension local PTAs, began to integrate. Members of predominantly Black parent–teacher organizations,
however, had mixed opinions on this process and expressed concerns about the racial unification of parent–teacher organizations. Black parents feared that they would lose power within the integrated organizations, thus silencing their voices which would otherwise vigorously advocate for the needs of the communities they represented (Heath, 2014). Woyshner (2011) indicated that as a “result of the integration of the PTA, through the South, black communities lost a network of leaders, parents, and citizens in schools, and neighborhoods” (p. 75). Some parents no longer wanted to attend PTA meetings because they “felt unwelcomed at white parent–teacher meetings” (Woyshner, 2011, p. 75). The inclusion of parents from diverse racial backgrounds was not a seamless or easy transition for some, but the Brown decision still had important implications because it began a period in which “minority groups previously excluded from power in educational decision-making achieved new influence through litigation” (Tyack & Benavot, 1985, p. 375).

The growing societal consciousness about increasing equity in education was reflected in educational legislation that emerged beginning in the 1960s. This legislation was specifically designed to assist students from traditionally underserved populations (Watson et al., 2012). In 1964, as part of the War on Poverty, Project Head Start was developed. This federally funded program was designed to provide early childhood education to children of low-income families (Hiatt-Michael, 2008). Each local Head Start program was required to have a policy council. Fifty percent of the members of the policy council had to be parents of students attending this program. This program is credited as “advancing a view of parents as program decision-makers while also supporting parents’ involvement in educating their children” (Powell & Diamond, 1995, p. 80).

The following year, President Johnson authorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The ESEA included Title I, which was intended “to provide financial assistance to local educational agencies serving areas with high concentrations
of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs by various means” (as cited in Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 52). Schools could determine how they would allocate Title I funds to develop programs that could narrow the achievement gap. Examples of these programs included but were not limited to instructional summer programs, tutoring, and specialized reading programs implemented during the school day (Office of Education, 1969). In addition to meeting low-income financial criteria, schools receiving Title I funds needed to comply with various mandates outlined in the law, which changed with each reauthorization of the law in the decades to follow (Thomas & Brady, 2005).

In the original version of the ESEA, there were not specific mandates regarding the inclusion of parents in children’s education; however, subsequent reauthorizations amended this omission (National PTA, 2009). When the law was reauthorized in 1967, it included information about the education of children with disabilities. The new additions to this law noted that parents of students with disabilities could be involved in the development of educational programs designed to benefit their children. In addition, it was recommended that information about services available to students with disabilities be distributed to parents (Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1967, 1968). Prior to this legislation, it was the prevailing belief among educational professionals that parents of students with disabilities should not be given opportunities to become involved in the education of their children because parents were often considered responsible for the development of a child’s disability (Powell & Diamond, 1995). The 1967 reauthorization also allocated funds to provide consultation to parents so that they could better understand the needs of their children’s disability. Funds were also reserved for the development of programs designed to educate the parents of children receiving bilingual services (Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1967, 1968). These aspects of the legislation reflected the previously held belief among individuals in the
field of education that focusing on the education of parents was the most effective way to develop parent–teacher relationships (Powell & Diamond, 1995). Researchers have noted that much of the initial work in academia and policy designed to bring schools and families together reflected a presumption among educators that a deficit existed in the parenting skills of families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and a belief that it was the role of professionals to remedy these deficits (Powell & Diamond, 1995).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provided additional legislative mandates for the inclusion of parents in the education of children. This law “revolutionized special education because it mandated parental involvement and provided the rights to due process that could insure it” (Powell & Diamond, 1995, p. 85).

In 1974, further amendments to the ESEA expanded parents’ opportunities to become involved in schools’ decision-making processes, mandating that schools develop parent advisory councils (PACs), which were to include parent members who were chosen from each school. PACs were tasked with the responsibility of advising schools on the implementation and evaluation of Title I programs designed to improve students’ academic achievement (Education Amendments of 1974).

Despite some of the progress that was made during the 1970s to include parents’ thoughts and opinions about best practices for improving schools and parental involvement programs, the 1981 reauthorization of the ESEA featured a decrease in parental involvement requirements, including the removal of the required PACs (Congressional Research Service, 2009). These changes have been attributed to the federal government’s concerns during that period with reducing federal spending and decreasing government involvement in many areas, including public education (Thomas & Brady, 2005).
The late 1980s marked a shift in thinking and legislation; changes to the nation’s demographics prompted educators to more consciously consider the ways in which language and culture impacted the formation of family–school partnerships. In addition, parents’ increasingly demanding schedules made it challenging for them to engage in “traditional modes of parent participation” (Powell & Diamond, 1995, p. 87). Consequently, “parent–teacher relationship practices needed to be revised to better fit the realities of current parent circumstances” (Powell & Diamond, 1995, p. 87). These evolving beliefs were reflected in the 1988 reauthorization of the ESEA; mandates about fostering and maintaining parental involvement were greatly expanded. These new mandates included the training of both parents and teachers in order for the two groups to work together more effectively. Moreover, authors of the reauthorization eliminated requirements for PACs, but mandated schools to consult with parents in the development of parental involvement policies. The amendments contained a list detailing the methods by which schools could foster partnerships between their staff and parents. Some of these included: holding regular parent conferences, allowing parents to volunteer, creating and distributing home-based learning activities, and communicating information about Title I programs in a timely manner (Augustus F. Hawkins-Robert T. Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988). These changes to the law ushered in a new era of parental involvement, in which parents were valued as equal partners in their children’s education; this outlook was reflected in subsequent reauthorizations of the ESEA throughout the 1990s (Congressional Research Service, 2009). Legislators no longer viewed parental involvement as the sole responsibility of parents. The language included in the 1994 reauthorization of the ESEA suggested that schools had a responsibility to accommodate the complex needs of families. Funds given to schools could be used to provide parents transportation and
childcare during school events in order to remove barriers that might otherwise prevent parents from meeting with school personnel to discuss the academic progress of their children (Beach, 1997).

In 2001, legislators renamed the ESEA the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and built on the legislation of the late 1980s and 1990s to further specify the ways schools should include parents. NCLB placed greater emphasis on the use of standardized testing data to monitor schools’ progress. Indeed, part of the parental involvement guidelines developed for NCLB required schools to inform parents about the status of school performance (Thomas & Brady, 2005). NCLB also offered parents greater choice to select a different school for their children to attend if their children’s current school failed to make adequate progress on state assessments (Congressional Research Service, 2009; Thomas & Brady, 2005).

NCLB remained in place until 2015 when legislators signed the Every Student Succeeds Act into law. This law, like its predecessors, outlined the ways in which parents should be granted opportunities to be involved in different aspects of their child’s education (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). In this version of the law, legislators changed the term parental involvement to parent and family engagement (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Through this law, legislators emphasized the use of community resources to assist in engaging families as indicated by the expanded suggestion to utilize “meaningful consultation with employers, business leaders, and philanthropic organizations, or individuals with expertise in effectively engaging parents and family members in education” (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015, p. 68). The term parent advisory council did appear in this new reauthorization; however, it was a suggestion for increasing engagement rather than a requirement that may prevent a school from receiving funds.

Although the policies developed over the course of several decades have increased practitioners’ awareness of the need to connect home and school, scholars have noted that “the policy
tells educators to engage families, but does not specify how to meet these requirements or how to improve the quality of their partnership programs” (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016, p. 203). Consequently, there exists “a critical gap between the intent and enactment of the law” (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016, p. 203). Identifying the obstacles which inhibit family–school partnerships and determining best practices for overcoming these obstacles as a way of narrowing the gap between intent and enactment is complex, given that the nature of family–school partnerships has changed with the evolving political climate and societal expectations in the United States.

**Barriers to Establishing Family–School Partnerships**

Scholars have asserted that “parents are concerned about their children’s education and the absence of their presence at their children’s school should not be interpreted as indifference or low educational value toward their children’s schooling” (Alexander, Cox, Behnke, & Larzelere, 2017, p. 176). Instead, researchers have attributed their lack of presence and involvement to a number of life demands which prevent ease of access to schools (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Elements of a school’s culture and climate may also prevent parents from fully engaging with schools and should be examined prior to dismissing parents as simply uninvolved (Alexander et al., 2017; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Research has shown that parents’ involvement in their children’s education, whether it is at school or at home, increases when barriers are removed and family–school partnerships are established (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2016). Therefore, a discussion about the establishment of family–school partnerships must include an examination of the barriers which interfere with the connections between home and school.

**Barriers to Communication**

Communication between parents and school personnel is an essential component to successful family–school partnerships (Epstein, 2011). Frequent communication, which values input from all
stakeholders, creates a sense of trust between parents and educators (Francis, Blue-Banning, Haines, Turnbull, & Gross, 2016). Many schools employ ineffective communication strategies, which prevent parents from experiencing that sense of trust and consequently decreases parents’ engagement in their children’s education (Baker, Wise, Kelley, Skiba, 2016; Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & McRoy, 2015). Baker et al. (2016), for example, claimed that “parents feel they could be more involved by being more informed” (p. 171). School personnel sometimes inform parents of the academic and behavioral difficulties students experience in school only after these difficulties have evolved into more serious problems. This limits parents’ ability to proactively discuss problems and implement solutions for improving students’ success (Baker et al., 2016; Reynolds et al., 2015).

Parents have also explained that they do not receive sufficient notice about opportunities for involvement within the school community (Baker et al., 2016; Luet, 2017; Murray et al. 2014). In addition, schools sometimes rely on students to pass along information to parents. The information shared by students can be inaccurate, and these inaccuracies, research has shown, may impede effective communication about school events and opportunities for involvement (Williams & Sanchez, 2011). Without accurate and timely notice, parents struggle, for example, to find childcare for their children during these events. Parents are also less able to ask their employers for time off in order to engage in school-based activities when they receive last minute information (Baker et al., 2016). When parents cannot attend school events, they may miss important information about how to better support their children’s academic growth at home, and they may also be precluded from sharing information with school personnel about their ideas regarding how to improve academic outcomes for their children in school.

Linguistic differences between parents and school personnel can also contribute to ineffective communication between families and schools (Xiong & Obiakor, 2013). When parents and teachers
do not speak the same language, the two parties hesitate to interact, and important information about children’s social and academic needs is not easily shared (Baker et al., 2016; Cooper, 2011). Moreover, schools do not always translate materials into families’ native languages; this prevents many families from receiving important school-related messages and further limits parents’ potential involvement in the education of their children (Soutullo, Smith-Bonahue, Sanders-Smith, & Navia, 2016). Parents whose native language is not English have reported feeling particularly unwelcomed and at a disadvantage in comparison to native-speaking parents when meetings or other school events are conducted in English without a translator (Luet, 2017; Turney & Kao, 2009). In addition, depending on the parents’ level of schooling, the educational language and terminology used in schools can be unfamiliar, further complicating communication efforts (Soutullo et al., 2016).

Cultural Barriers

Schools’ demographics have grown increasingly more diverse, while the demographics of school staff remain almost unchanged; that is, many educators are White and middle class (LaRocque et al., 2011). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), in 2012, “82 percent of public-school teachers were white in comparison, 51 percent of all elementary and secondary public-school students were white. In contrast, 16 percent of students were black, and 7 percent of public teachers were black. Likewise, while 24 percent of students were Hispanic, 8 percent of teachers were Hispanic” (p. 6). Although not impossible to overcome, differing cultural views about the roles of families and schools can cause a perception among teachers that parents are disinterested in supporting their children’s education. Sensing this perception, researchers have described a dynamic through which parents thus believe that they are not welcomed members of the school community (Becerra, 2012; Good et al., 2010).
Families view teachers’ roles differently based on their own cultural understandings and educational experiences. Some parents view teachers as the ultimate authority on education; therefore, although they have “high aspirations for their children to become respectable and productive members of society” they often hesitate to engage in actions which they believe could be perceived as interfering with teachers’ expertise (Garcia Coll et al., 2002, p. 318). For instance, Garcia Coll et al. (2002) explained that, in Cambodia, “it is assumed that teachers are the best equipped to guide the child’s academic and moral development, and parental involvement in schooling would be seen as inappropriate and disrespectful” (p. 317). Other families, although they may have a more collaborative view of the relationship between parents and teachers, have expressed feelings that teachers are in a greater position of authority within their classrooms and that appropriate communication depends on teachers initiating contact and directing conversations during meetings (Isik-Ercan, 2010). Still others see teachers an extension of their family and expect that teachers will take a personal interest in students and their families beyond their instructional obligations (Isik-Ercan, 2010). With a variety of views held by families, it can be difficult for teachers to understand and accommodate all families when working to create family–school partnerships, especially if those views are unfamiliar to the teachers, who in many cases in schools characterized by economic, racial, or ethnic diversity are White and middle class (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, & Garcia, 2009). Parents may feel similarly frustrated and confused as they try to understand teachers’ expectations for their involvement, ultimately creating strained or nonexistent relationships (Good et al., 2010). Some parents have also reported feeling hesitant to interact with school personnel based on negative past experiences in which they perceived staff members as disrespectful. These strained past interactions can lead parents to distrust school staff (Williams et al., 2011).
Families who have immigrated to the United States may also be grappling with their changing perceptions of self as they adjust to their new surroundings, which can lead to further disconnections between home and school. Good et al., (2010) explained that parents do not always “feel connected to the new culture in the United States, in the school, or in the community” (p. 330). The authors also indicated that many immigrant parents lament “a loss of ability to parent their children in the traditional ways they valued” (p. 330).

The norms and expectations of the U.S. school system may differ from the norms and expectations of the school system in which parents were educated (Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Reynolds et al., 2015). When this is the case, some parents hesitate to ask teachers clarifying questions and express concerns about their children and the curriculum because they feel their thoughts will not be well received (Isik-Ercan, 2010). Parents will sometimes hesitate to provide academic assistance in the home as well. This is especially true when the instructional approaches that parents are familiar with differ from the approaches their children’s teachers use (Inoa, 2017). Parents worry that they will inhibit their children’s academic progress by teaching their children methods and strategies that are not consistent with what they have been taught in school (Reynolds et al., 2015).

**Socioeconomic Barriers**

Socioeconomic factors can also affect the creation of family–school partnerships. Many parents cannot attend school events because they conflict with parents’ work schedules (Luet, 2017; Murray et al., 2014; Turney & Kao, 2009; Williams & Sanchez, 2011). Families who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to this trend, especially when they do not have access to transportation or cannot afford transportation fees in order to attend school events (Turney & Kao, 2009; Williams & Sanchez, 2011; Yoder & Lopez, 2013). Also, when families cannot pay various school fees, they may avoid school events because they feel embarrassed
or uncomfortable (Williams & Sanchez, 2011). For example, in a study that examined the perceptions of public housing residents’ interactions with schools, it was noted that there were a variety of tangible barriers to involvement, but feelings of marginalization emerged as the greatest deterrent to families’ engagement with their children’s schools (Yoder & Lopez, 2013). The participants shared instances in which they said they believed they were dismissed, excluded, and stigmatized because of their low-income status. Low socioeconomic status can also be associated with “economic hardships” which cause families to seek new jobs or housing, leading to increased school mobility, a phenomenon that has the potential to lead to a lack of stable relationships between families and school districts (Fiel, Haskins, & Turley, 2013).

Cooper, Crosnoe, Suizzo, and Pituch (2010) examined the role that socioeconomic status can play in establishing a connection between home and school. Parents affected by poverty reported engaging their children in educationally based activities at home. However, after closer examination, the researchers reported that impoverished families use fewer cognitively stimulating materials at home with their children than parents of a higher socioeconomic status. It was also reported that these families are less involved in their children’s schools. The researchers suggested that finances and available time may lead to this limited involvement (Cooper et al., 2010).

**School Climate Barriers**

Elements of a school’s climate such as “the openness of the school environment, the caring attitude of the school staff, positive interpersonal relationships, a simple smile, a friendly gesture, and respect lead parents to become partners in the challenging task of educating their children” (Kim, 2009, p. 88). Although it is important to consider the barriers related to parents’ particular cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, researchers caution that solely focusing on the home environment can prevent educators from examining the ways in which a school’s climate could be
improved to better encourage the establishment of family–school partnerships (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Kim, 2009).

School climate is shaped by the views held by the professionals within the organization (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Some educators view parents through a deficit lens, thus preventing them from seeing parents as valuable and equal partners in their child’s education (Kim, 2009; Taliaferro, DeCuir-Gunby, & Allen-Eckard, 2009). Researchers have documented teachers’ perspectives that “parents simply ‘don’t care’” or that they are “so downtrodden by the ‘cares of life’ that they could not give their children the necessary attention to promote achievement” (Taliaferro et al., 2009, p. 283). Teachers who hold these views tend to avoid extending invitations for involvement to parents who they believe “do not have the time, interest, money, or energy to support what they are doing” (Kim, 2009, p. 87).

Researchers have asserted that large, urban schools can be “characterized by less safety and less respect,” which creates a school climate that “suppresses the level of communication and opportunities for involvement as perceived by parents of students in these schools” (Goldkind & Farmer, 2013, p. 237). Even at smaller schools, parents who are eager to support students’ academic growth both in school and at home, are commonly less likely to do so when they perceive that the school does not encourage or value their support (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2016; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Kim, 2009). A number of factors contribute to this perception of being undervalued or disregarded. Indeed, parents have shared, for example, that teachers’ words, tone, body language, and actions can convey to parents that they are considered to be the problem (Baker et al., 2016; Good et al., 2010; Lasater, 2016; Yull et al., 2014). A common theme presented throughout the literature is that parents from diverse cultural backgrounds feel that schools lack cultural competence; thus, parents have explained, their interactions with school personnel are
characterized by stereotypes, racism, and disrespect (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Good et al., 2010; Yull et al., 2014). Parents’ attempts to express opinions, ask questions, and advocate for their children are often dismissed as threatening, aggressive, or unfounded (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Good et al., 2010; Yull et al., 2014). These kinds of interactions, scholars have documented, make parents feel isolated, marginalized, ignored, and devalued (Yoder & Lopez, 2013; Yull et al., 2014).

Unresolved conflicts further contribute to a negative school climate and erode the cultivation of family–school partnerships. Research has shown that when parents and teachers cannot come to a mutually amenable conclusion after a disagreement, future communication tends to convey hostility and prevents strong relationships from forming over the course of the school year. In some instances, children recognize lingering tensions between their parents and teachers, which can affect their sense of connectedness and level of comfort in school (Lasater, 2016).

Teachers’ challenges and misconceptions about parental involvement may be partially attributed to their lack of preparation and even formal training to work with families. Teachers have shared that their teacher preparation programs and subsequent professional development as in-service teachers rarely provide them with the training necessary to “build relationships with families nor to effectively resolve conflicts with them” (Lasater, 2016, p. 253). Researchers have echoed teachers’ concerns that there is a lack of adequate coursework at the college level which addresses topics related to the establishment of family–school partnerships (de Bruïne et al., 2014; King & Butler, 2015; Patte, 2011). Teacher candidates’ backgrounds and experiences also influence their perceptions, especially as they relate to culturally diverse settings (Ford & Quinn, 2010; Kidd, Sanchez, & Thorp, 2008; Mueller & Hindin, 2009). These perceptions and dispositions can influence individuals’ actions as they transition from teacher candidates to professional educators (Lee et al., 2010; Mueller & Hindin, 2009). Lee et al. (2010) stressed the importance of providing teachers with
adequate training about topics related to family–school partnerships, noting that “teachers—both pre-service and in-service—who are put into radically new and different situations generally attempt to transplant their own cultural map onto the new environment, which can lead to misinterpretation by the teacher of cultural behavior” (p. 102). This lack of preparation has prompted some teachers to utilize strategies for engagement based on stereotypes or on limited knowledge about what motivates parents to support their children’s academic growth—potentially creating a less welcoming school climate (Lee et al., 2010).

Schools’ policies and practices also shape the school environment. For example, a traditional parent–teacher conference, although it may be a common practice at many schools, may not be the way in which families feel comfortable engaging with school personnel. That is, parents have reported feeling uncomfortable with the formal or business-like nature of parent–teacher conferences (Kim, 2009). Furthermore, parents have shared that the time restrictions placed on more traditional conferences, while a practical approach for ensuring that a number of families can meet, prevents parents from engaging in productive and open conversations about their child’s needs (Kim, 2009).

Moreover, parents have indicated a desire for more opportunities to observe their children’s classrooms as a way of better understanding teachers’ academic expectations (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). Parents have expressed that restrictions on classroom visits hinder their involvement and limit their ability to provide their children with the support necessary for academic growth. Parents have shared that they could be more helpful at home if they could go directly into the classroom to gain more knowledge about students’ behavioral and academic needs (Baker et al., 2016). Although policies preventing parents’ access to classrooms may stem from a desire to ensure student safety, some parents perceive their denied access to their children’s classrooms as a sign that the teachers
view them as too invasive, incompetent, and questioning of instructional methods (Allen & White-Smith, 2018).

**Strategies for Establishing Family–School Partnerships**

Schools need to adopt a systematic approach to addressing the common barriers that impede the establishment of family–school partnerships (Good et al., 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Scholars have documented that it is efficacious when school personnel adopt multiple strategies to increase relationships between schools and families. It benefits personnel to utilize a “menu of approaches,” which account for the “fluid and ever-changing nature of relationships” (Francis et al., 2016, p. 33). Developing a wide variety of strategies in collaboration with and respecting the perspectives and input of multiple stakeholders has proven successful. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) also emphasized the importance of revisiting strategy implementation over the course of the school year to evaluate its effectiveness and to make necessary adjustments.

Throughout the year, allocating time in faculty meetings to collaboratively problem solve issues that may inhibit the formation of strong relationships between schools and families has been touted as an effective strategy (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). As part of a systematic approach to building relationships with parents, multiple stakeholders can assess current school policies and programs to determine if certain aspects need to be adjusted in order to make the school more inviting (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). For instance, scholars have explored successful outcomes when schools determine how to safely grant parents greater access to classrooms through observations and volunteerism (Soutullo et al., 2016). Developing a system for obtaining and documenting input from parents on the part of school personnel has been shown to effectively address many parental needs (Baker et al., 2016; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).
Strategies for Overcoming Barriers to Communication

Schools that communicate information about opportunities for in-school involvement to parents in a timely manner in order to allow parents enough time to rearrange their work schedules and secure childcare have stronger family–school partnerships (Baker et al., 2016). In addition, communication about students’ academic and behavioral concerns, when proactively communicated, supports parents in addressing student concerns before they escalate to larger problems (Baker et al., 2016; Sterian & Mocanu, 2013). Simultaneously, when parents contact teachers about concerns, teachers should respond as quickly as possible (Francis et al., 2016). Parents, scholars have documented, enjoy receiving frequent and positive updates about their child’s academic progress (Francis et al., 2016). Schools have utilized “brag notes” or “positive postcards” to build a rapport with families and share encouraging updates about students. Scholars have recommended that these kinds of written communication could include photographs, which help parents to feel more connected to their children’s classrooms (Francis et al., 2016).

In order to address barriers related to linguistic differences, scholars have recommended translating all written communication into multiple languages (Baker et al., 2016; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) and assuring that interpreters attend parent meetings and other school events (Baker et al., 2016; Francis et al., 2016). Another effective approach is to connect with members of the community who are bilingual “to fill the role of facilitator between teachers and parents,” which allows them to serve as “invaluable assets to parental involvement and engagement” (Cooper, 2011, p. 3).

Strategies for Overcoming Cultural Barriers

When educators have knowledge about and value the diverse cultures of the families with whom they work, greater connections between schools and families can form. Attending cultural
events that are important to the families of children who are enrolled in a school is one step towards developing this knowledge (Xiong & Obiakor, 2013). Another aspect of understanding and valuing families from diverse cultural backgrounds is acknowledging that parents were sometimes taught in different ways (Lewis, Kim, & Bey, 2011). Instead of viewing these ways as wrong, educators should embrace different ideas and view them as a way to enhance a child’s education. By encouraging parents to assist with homework even if they use a different strategy or method than what was presented in school, teachers can overcome this barrier, which may otherwise decrease parents’ in-home support of students’ academic development. Educators who adopt this strategy could help parents to feel empowered and encouraged to become involved in their child’s education at home rather than feeling discouraged, undervalued, and possibly uninvolved just because their methodology or approach differed (Lewis et al., 2011).

Schools can take additional steps to empower parents who may be hesitant to ask for clarification because they are unfamiliar with the norms of the school system or the academic content. School personnel could create a comfortable and inviting parent center at the school or district level. This location could be a place for parents to connect with each other as well as a place for schools to distribute information about opportunities for involvement to parents. Schools could offer workshops to parents in order to increase their familiarity with the school system, academic topics, and suggestions for at-home academic support (Fishman & Nickerson, 2015; Hands, 2013; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The information shared at these workshops, scholars have asserted, has the potential to highlight the academic and behavioral benefits that students can experience when parents and teachers work collaboratively. Researchers and practitioners have warned against attitudes that might indicate to parents that they lack the ability to help their children succeed. Rather, the information shared should help parents to understand how their “strengths, preferences, and
resources” could be harnessed to enhance students’ educational experiences (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Studies have revealed that when developing these classes, school personnel should account for potential barriers that may impede parents’ attendance such as the language spoken, access to transportation, and childcare needs (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011; Hands, 2013). Establishing trust between families and the instructor is also important (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011).

Community-based organizations have been shown effective in providing educators with coaching and support as the teachers develop workshops and classes to support parents (Ishimaru, 2013). These organizations have the capacity to provide parents with information about how to effectively communicate with schools and how to support their children’s education at home. They may also help parents to understand their “rights and responsibilities” in regards to their children’s education and “the structure and function of the school system” (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011, p. 12). Community based organizations provide parents with a supportive space in which to exchange resources and ideas, while offering each other encouragement. In addition, these organizations can help parents to view their communities in a more positive way and provide a bridge between parents and schools, allowing parents to have a voice within schools as collaborative partners. The sense of community among families that community-based organizations can cultivate, as well as the tools these organizations can provide, empower families to become greater advocates for themselves and their children (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012).

When schools utilize community-based organizations, they increase social capital among parents, which often counteracts parents’ perception that they are unwelcome members of the school community. This matters because research has shown that “the strongest factor associated with parents’ involvement in school was their social capital—the number of other parents from their child’s classroom that they spoke regularly with and knew well enough to talk to” (Durand, 2011, p.
Parents can be empowered to “overcome their feelings of intimidation and alienation from schools by building their confidence in navigating schools” (Ishimaru, 2014, p. 204).

Researchers have examined specific community-based organizations that have been used to support schools and families. Although not all school and district leaders will have access to the specific organizations investigated, the practices associated with these organizations can provide a viable example for school and district leaders as they think about how to best support parents.

In particular, Ishimaru (2013) examined the role of a faith-based community organization, People Acting in Community Together. Members of People Acting in Community Together coached school principals to work collaboratively with teachers and parents; they encouraged principals to identify and capitalize on opportunities that would allow staff members and teachers to engage in decision-making dialogue. Based on the information collected, the Ishimaru reported that shared leadership provided a viable approach to address and avoid imbalances in power that typically exist between principals and parents. The author of the study also explained that programs of this nature can provide a way for principals and parents to build a relationship to work towards a common goal. It was recommended that school leaders include community members in conversations about school policy (Ishimaru, 2013).

Another community-based organization, The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, taught classes to parents who were of Mexican origin and spoke Spanish as their first language (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011). The organization conducted the classes in Spanish and provided refreshments and childcare. There was a total of 12 classes, which lasted for 2 hours and covered topics such as “parents’ rights and responsibilities, the structure and function of the school system, college requirements, financial aid, and leadership and group process skills” (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011, p. 12). The researchers suggested that part of the classes’ success can be attributed
to the trust that was established between the instructors and the parents. The instructors facilitated conversations in which participants discussed perceived injustices and the ways in which they could be addressed. The discussions featured as part of the classes held by this organization helped to increase social capital among parents (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011).

Some schools have created opportunities to increase and strengthen families’ networks by allowing parents to form welcome teams and/or one-on-one family matches so that families can connect and create a greater sense of community (Francis et al., 2016). In this scenario, schools often match parents with other families based on similarities such as the age of their children or their cultural or linguistic backgrounds. In addition, parents who are new to the school may be matched with parents who have more experience with the school (Francis et al., 2016).

**Strategies for Overcoming Socioeconomic Barriers**

Schools can employ a variety of strategies to remove barriers associated with parents’ socioeconomic status. Particularly important when scheduling meetings or other school events is that, schools take parents’ work schedules into consideration and provide multiple time options for parents to attend and ask for input from parents as to the most convenient times (Baker et al., 2016; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Also key, organizers should provide childcare and food during meetings or other school events whenever possible to increase the possibility that parents will be able to attend (Francis et al., 2016).

Baker et al. (2016) suggested that one option, if parents do not have access to transportation to attend meetings with teachers, is the use of phone conferences or email to converse with parents. Teachers can also use websites and parent portals to keep parents informed about upcoming assignments and students’ grades. When appropriate, some educators may consider going to the parent’s home or other convenient location (Baker et al., 2016).
Strategies for Overcoming School Climate Barriers

Cooper (2011) explained that “Parents must be made to feel that they can play a positive role in their child’s school success,” advocating that strategies can be employed to create a school climate which promotes and encourages parents to perceive their role in this way (p. 4). Parental involvement is strengthened when individuals feel encouraged to become involved due to a school climate that is positive and inviting. To move forward, complex transformations of school climate can begin with small steps. For instance, in order to create a more welcoming school environment, staff members can begin by being more cognizant of their nonverbal behavior, which may convey to parents that they are the problem (Lasater, 2016).

Researchers have advocated for teachers to receive more training in order to increase their level of cultural competence and equip them with strategies for resolving conflicts with parents and cultivating healthy family–school partnerships, which can lead to an improved school climate (Fishman & Nickerson, 2015; Francis et al., 2016; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Lasater, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2015). School leaders can also utilize intentional hiring practices to ensure that they add to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the staff, and that those hired align with the goals of the school (Baker et al., 2016; Francis et al., 2016; Yull et al., 2014).

The school climate, scholars have noted, is greatly impacted by the vision held and expressed by the school’s leaders (Haines et al., 2015; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Indeed, researchers found that parents have indicated that they believe that principals play a significant role in whether or not they become involved. Parents have reported that they feel they can trust school leaders when school leaders appear approachable, actively listen to their concerns, and convey a sense of warmth (Sheldon, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010). Parents have also shared that when school leaders skillfully and efficiently mediate conflicts, their trust increases further. Conversely, it has been
reported that when school leaders dismiss parents’ concerns, parents’ level of trust in school leaders decreases (Sheldon et al., 2010). These beliefs expressed by parents suggest that school leaders must carefully consider the messages conveyed to all stakeholders about collaboration, involvement, and trust. This means that school leaders must determine how to create more welcoming school climates. In short, parents have shared that they perceive that principals set the tone for the school climate which is then transmitted to teachers, students, and parents in regards to the importance of family–school partnerships; consequently, principals have considerable potential to create more inclusive school environments (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014).

If school or district leaders want teachers to adopt more innovative approaches to creating family–school partnerships, scholars have shown that there must be an atmosphere that promotes, encourages, and supports innovative endeavors (Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleegers, 2010). It has been argued that when principals are seen as transformational leaders, teachers are more likely to seek them out for advice. Researchers have also found that when principals engage in transformational leadership, teachers are more likely to take risks and try new and innovative methods. Additionally, when principals are perceived as more connected to the teachers, teachers also perceived the school climate to be more supportive of trying new practices (Moolenaar et al., 2010). These findings imply that, as with any change process, the individuals involved will need to seek advice at some point throughout the process. If school leaders want individuals to transform their interactions with parents, then they must make themselves approachable and willing to share advice. As Epstein, Galindo, and Sheldon (2011) explained, however, before any advice can be given, school leaders must first be knowledgeable about best practices for supporting family–school partnerships. Therefore, to overcome barriers that impede the establishment of family–school partnerships, school
leaders must stay current with information related to the design and implementation of best practices in this arena.

Auerbach (2010) extolled the use of a shared leadership approach in this context, explaining that if parent meetings or training sessions are used, parents should be given the opportunity to have input about what information they would like to see addressed. The researcher also reported that, for authentic partnerships to be established, school leaders must view parents as equal stakeholders. Additionally, Auerbach (2010) indicated that, if parent advisory groups are established, school leaders must actively engage in and collaborate with these groups.

Scholars have noted that invitations for involvement from their children motivate parents to become involved (Fishman & Nickerson, 2015; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Therefore, part of changing the school climate to more effectively foster family-school partnerships involves including students in the change process. Teachers can demonstrate to students how they can invite their parents to assist with homework or talk about their day; indeed, students may first need opportunities to role play this in school before approaching their parents (Fishman & Nickerson, 2015).

**Conclusion**

Educational policies in the United States regarding the inclusion of parents in the academic development of their children have evolved to reflect changing societal perspectives and developments in research. Policy makers from diverse political standpoints have realized the importance of cultivating family-school partnerships and have acted to enhance them. Scholars generally concur that families face a myriad of barriers in effectively becoming involved in their children’s education, which prevent relationships between schools and families from flourishing. In many circumstances, these barriers can be mitigated by proactive strategies taken by the school or the district to improve family-school partnerships. These can include adjusting meeting times to meet
the needs of parents’ schedules; acknowledging and incorporating the multiple perspectives, 
languages, and knowledge of diverse families; and increasing social capital through the use of parent 
centers. The literature did reveal innovative and creative ways for schools to reach out to parents, 
including partnering with community-based organizations that are more imbedded in the lives of 
ethnically and culturally diverse populations and can provide resources such as language support. 
Teachers as well as school and district leaders must all be careful not to disregard populations of 
parents who are vulnerable to isolation from the school community.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of middle school parents who were attempting to form successful family–school partnerships with their children’s middle school and the factors, from their perspective, that served as either barriers or catalysts for the formation of these alliances. This chapter provides an explanation of the researcher’s decision to pursue answers to the research question using an IPA approach, within the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm. It outlines the general tenets and justifies the use of an IPA strategy of inquiry. This overview of the study’s methodology also includes a summary of the research design, recruitment methods, data collection process, data storage methods, and data analysis approach.

Research Question

What are the experiences of families of youth attending a middle school in an urban school district in central Massachusetts in forming and sustaining family–school partnerships to enhance their involvement in their children’s education?

Paradigm and the Role of the Researcher

The constructivism–interpretivism paradigm, through which a researcher can acknowledge multiple viewpoints (Butin, 2010), most appropriately aligned with the present study because the research question was not designed to illuminate a single truth or correct answer, but rather, the experiences of a multiple of stakeholders. A researcher using this paradigm to investigate his or her topic would gather and report individuals’ perspectives. In this paradigm, the researcher is not concerned with hypothesis testing, measurements, and generalizations, but rather with specific experiences of the participants and how they make meaning of them. Ponterotto (2005) explained that, within this paradigm, researchers seek to understand the “lived experiences from the point of view of those who live it day to day” (p. 129). Through information gleaned from dialogue with
participants, the researcher can begin to tell the story of the people highlighted in the study (Ponterotto, 2005).

“Reality,” according to Akella (2011), “has meaning which is a construction of human interaction” (p. 63). Ponterotto (2005) further explained that “the researcher and her or his participants jointly create (co-construct) findings from their interactive dialogue and interpretation” (p. 129). No single and universal truth is pursued. Although the researcher recognized bias, she attempted, to the best of her ability, to acknowledge her own positionality and to understand its role in the interpretation of the data collected. To the greatest extent possible, the researcher set aside biases to authentically observe, record, and interpret the participants’ experiences.

**Research Design: Qualitative Research**

Partnerships between schools and families are influenced by the relationships that have been established between parties. In this study, the researcher collected qualitative data in recognition of the emotions attached to the establishment of family–school partnerships. The factors that influence these relationships are not readily illustrated in quantitative terms, and the barriers and catalysts to partnership formation are not easily reduced to ranges or numerical values (Creswell, 2015)—nor is the strength of a family–school partnership, which stakeholders establish over time and through a process. Creswell (2015) explained that “in qualitative research, you collect data to learn from the participants in the study” (p. 17). Further, a qualitative approach is more likely to reveal the complexity of the issues posed by the research questions, providing thick, rich description, which quantitative data collection and analysis fall short of providing (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014).

**Research Tradition**

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) explained that “IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (p. 1). In
order to investigate a particular experience, scholars of this methodology have suggested using one-
on-one semi structured interviews with participants as the source of data collection and analysis
(Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). The philosophy behind using these interviews is that they provide
an opportunity for participants to have a voice to describe, in depth, what their experiences with a
certain phenomenon are, and how they make sense of these experiences (Smith, 2004; Smith et al.,
2009).

Three major philosophical underpinnings influenced the development of the IPA method of
qualitative inquiry: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The concept of phenomenology
stemmed from the work of Husserl who theorized that “experience should be examined in the way
that it occurs, and in its own terms” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). For Husserl, this meant that
individuals’ experiences should be described prereflectively, meaning that the researcher does not
include his or her interpretation (Dowling, 2007; Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). To do this,
Husserl advocated for researchers to bracket or put aside their biases and suppositions as a way of
avoiding “the distractions and misdirection of their own assumptions and preconceptions” that could
influence the phenomenon under investigation (Smith et al., 2009, p. 14). Dowling (2007) explained
that “This involves the phenomenologist attempting to meet the phenomenon as free and as
unprejudiced as possible in order that the phenomenon present itself as free and as unprejudiced way
as possible so that it can be precisely described and understood” (p. 132). Heidegger, a student of
Husserl, proposed a slightly different view of phenomenology, theorizing that humans cannot
completely separate themselves from the context in which they exist, thus the researcher will
inevitably incorporate some level of their own interpretation to understand the chosen phenomena
(Larkin et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Merleau-Ponty, another key scholar associated with this
philosophy, asserted that although one can observe and interpret the experiences of others, he or she
can never truly experience precisely what someone else is going through; each person’s experiences are unique to him or her in a given situation (Smith et al., 2009). Sartre further influenced the concept of phenomenology, positing that an individual’s “perception of the world is shaped largely by the presence of others and others have their own projects they are engaged in” (as cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 20).

The philosophy of hermeneutics also underpins IPA, and through it, scholars can address the issue of interpretation. Schleiermacher, a scholar who contributed to the development of this theory, viewed interpretation as part of this method as a craft or art form in which one engages with his or her intuition rather than a definite series of steps or methods (Smith et al., 2009). The interpretative analyst has the advantage of viewing a text in a way that may reveal insight that may not be readily apparent to the original author (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger provided additional insights by explaining that the role of the phenomenologist is to facilitate the revelation of information which may have otherwise been hidden beneath the surface (Smith et al., 2009). Gadamer, another key theorist of hermeneutics, was concerned primarily with the reading and interpretation of historical and literary texts, but his ideas contributed to the development of contemporary IPA methods. He categorized interpretation as a dialogue and posited that as one engages in the process of interpretation, assumptions and preconceptions become clear (Dowling, 2007; Smith et al., 2009).

The hermeneutic circle is a key concept to IPA. This means, according to Smith et al. (2009), that “the process of analysis is iterative—we may move back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking about the data, rather than completing each step, one after the other” (p. 28). The part affects the meaning of the whole and the whole affects the meaning of the part.

The final philosophy associated with IPA is idiography, which refers to a focus on the particular. Researchers who use the IPA method of inquiry aspire to complete analysis that is
strategic, in-depth, and detailed. Smith et al. (2009) explained that researchers who use IPA are “committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context” (p. 29). Therefore, studies conducted with the IPA methodology typically rely on a small, purposively selected sample of participants who have a close and thorough understanding of the phenomena (Smith et al., 2009).

A number of scholars have voiced concerns about IPA research. Smith et al. (2009), for example, noted that one concern is that the findings cannot be generalized because they are idiographic in nature. But they countered that results from an IPA can indeed be applied to a broader context because “delving deeper into the particular also takes us closer to the universal” (p. 31). Another concern, which Dowling (2007) documented is that scholars engage in extensive debate regarding whether bracketing one’s context and outlook is useful or possible. Todres and Wheeler (2001) stated, “phenomenology without hermeneutics can become shallow” (cited in Dowling, 2007, p. 134), thus affirming the value of interpretation and exploration without rigorous bracketing. In short, they asserted that the practice of bracketing leads to interpretations that lack depth and value. Larkin et al. (2011) suggested a middle ground, claiming that “to ‘bracket’ one’s preconceptions is to suspend them, and allow them to be examined—not to eradicate them” (p. 323). The authors thus explained that bracketing is “a means of exposing and engaging with one’s own presuppositions” (p. 32). Therefore, the job of the researcher is not to completely remove the context in which he or she exists, but to address and confront it.

**Context**

The district from which parents were recruited for this study is located in central Massachusetts. There are 5,362 students enrolled in the district. Fifty one percent of the district’s
students are Hispanic, 26.9.4% of the students are Caucasian, 6.5% of the students are African American, 4.8% of the students are Asian, and 7.3% of the students non-Hispanic, multiracial (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018a). Additionally, about 34.8% of students in the district do not speak English as their first language (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018a). The district’s population of students with disabilities is 24.2%. Over half, 60.9%, of the students at the school are also considered economically disadvantaged (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018a). This is substantially higher than the state-wide average of 30.2%. Based on state testing, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has designated the district’s three middle schools as needing outside assistance and intervention in order to improve student achievement (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018b). The three middle schools, based on test scores, are in the lowest 10% of schools in the state of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018b). The participants in this study all had students who attended one of the middle schools in this district.

The selected district was appropriate for an IPA study because the families whose children attended schools in the district share many of the attributes that make parents vulnerable to facing exclusion from the family–school partnership process. Race, language, socioeconomic status, and disability have been established in the literature as categories which can affect the establishment family–school partnerships. The district’s diversity and the makeup of the student body make it a highly appropriate site for this research.

**Participants**

Initially, the researcher used a purposive sampling strategy to select participants because the researcher aimed to “capture data on the perceptions of local participants . . . through a process of
deep attentiveness” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 9). Creswell (2015) indicated that when using this method of sampling “researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (p. 205). As the study unfolded, the researcher used a snowball sampling strategy through which, “the researcher asks participants to recommend other individuals to be sampled” (Creswell, 2015, p. 208). When deemed appropriate, during interviews with an initial set of participants, the researcher asked for input regarding other individuals who may provide additional information about the problem under investigation.

Participants included families whose children attended an urban middle school in central Massachusetts. The researcher used purposive sampling, seeking a group that was immersed in the phenomenon and could thus provide the best insights by narrating their experiences. A purposive sample, in contrast to a random sample, aims to identify “a more closely defined group from whom the research question will be significant” (Smith & Osborne, 2008, p. 28). Given the diversity of the general population of the district, the researcher included family participants who were representative of the diversity of the district as a whole. In this way, the qualitative data obtained was drawn from a subset of the population that reflected the diversity of the general population. Consequently, the findings from the analysis of data collected are more readily applicable to the general student body, and thus, to other districts with comparable student demographics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The researcher used a small sample size, in line with IPA parameters for analyzing the experiences of the participants because it allowed the researcher to complete a more in-depth study of the complexities of the phenomena under investigation (Smith, 2004). Creswell (2015) cautioned that including too many participants in a study can result in obtaining only “superficial perspectives” (p. 208). The researcher interviewed 9 participants.
Scholars have contended that the small and purposefully selected sample of participants in a qualitative study limits the researcher’s ability to generalize findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, Smith et al. (2009) indicated that the narrow focus of IPA can enhance the existing body of knowledge and help scholars to better understand a problem and how it could potentially be solved because of its depth and complexity. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that the term generalization should not always be defined in the traditional, statistical terms associated with quantitative studies; the particulars of a qualitative study can provide insight that can be applied to a broader context. Husserl, Smith theorized that the “essential features of an experience would transcend the particular circumstances of their appearance, and might then illuminate a given experience for others too” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). The depth that a small, qualitative IPA study can offer has the potential to benefit scholars and practitioners more than a surface-level analysis of a large, random sample of participants (Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Smith et al., 2009).

**Recruitment and Access**

The researcher submitted all appropriate documentation to secure permission from Northeastern University’s Internal Review Board (IRB) to carry out the study under the most ethical and rigorous research standards. With permission from the school district (Appendix A), the researcher distributed a recruitment flyer (Appendix B) and a recruitment letter (Appendix C) to students for them to share with their families, who were the potential participants. The researcher also shared the flyer on the social media account of a community group. Individuals interested in participating in the study were instructed to express their interest by contacting the researcher through the email address or phone number that was listed on the advertisement. Because of the large Spanish-speaking population in the school district, the researcher provided a Spanish translation of
the advertisement. All participants were offered a $20.00 gift card as a participation incentive, which was provided after the data collection process was completed.

The researcher took steps to complete the study with the highest ethical standards. The researcher reviewed and carefully adhered to the regulations for working with human subjects outlined by the National Institutes of Health and completed the appropriate certification process. Prior to engaging in any interviews, the researcher obtained informed consent, which was “designed to inform research subjects about the purpose, risks, potential benefits and alternatives to the research that allows people to make a decision about whether or not to participate based on their own goals and values” (National Institutes of Health, 2018, p. 21). To accomplish this, participants received an informed consent form (Appendix D) and the researcher orally reviewed the information in the form, including the purpose of the study, with participants; the researcher answered all questions regarding the research process and the intent of the study before participants were asked to sign. The researcher also explicitly informed participants that there was no pressure to sign the consent form and that they could end the interview or their participation in the study at any time, without consequences, and with assurance that none of the data collected up until that time would be used in the study (National Institutes of Health, 2011). The informed consent form was translated into Spanish and Portuguese. For parents whose first language was not English, an interpreter was present to ensure that all information about the study was fully understood. The researcher and the interpreter agreed to maintain confidentiality (National Institutes of Health, 2011). When reporting data, the researcher ensured participant confidentiality by using pseudonyms; she similarly protected any “information that would indicate which individuals . . . provided which data” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 63).
Northeastern University’s IRB further ensured adherence to ethical standards. The IRB reviewed the application submitted by the researcher to ensure that all elements of the study adhered to federal regulations regarding the protection of human subjects.

**Data Collection**

The researcher employed semi-structured interviews to conduct this study. The interview protocol (Appendix E) featured open-ended questions that were developed to facilitate semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). As part of the study, the researcher conducted interviews with the parent participants that lasted approximately one hour. The researcher conducted the interviews at a location that was most comfortable and convenient for the participants. Interviews were recorded using a digital recording device. The researcher uploaded the audio file with only pseudonyms revealed to Rev.com for transcription.

**Storage and Management**

The researcher uploaded electronic copies of interview transcripts to a password-protected DropBox file and stored hardcopies of the interview transcripts and documents compiled for document review in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher’s home. Interview recordings and transcripts were destroyed following the researcher’s analysis and completion of the publication of the findings. Study participants were informed of the precautions and procedures for the destruction of materials prior to participation in the study. Participants received the transcripts of their respective interviews within a reasonable time after the completion of the interview to conduct member checking for the review, annotation, correction, or amendment of the data transcribed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)
Data Analysis

The researcher began by printing the transcripts and reading the hard copies once to get a sense of the big picture. This first read was conducted while listening to the audio recording of the interview so that the researcher could be immersed in the nuances that were revealed through the voice of the participant (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher read the transcripts again, and the second time she took notes in the margins of the transcript (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher used In Vivo coding because it is recommended for studies that “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 74). The researcher then completed second cycle coding, more specifically employing an axial coding method for this stage. In axial coding, the researcher determines where ideas from first-cycle coding fit together to create categories (Saldaña, 2016). Smith et al. (2009) suggested typing categories or emerging themes and then cutting them out and physically arranging them as a way of determining where repeated patterns may exist. They also recommended creating a typed visual display, such as a table that can capture final themes that have emerged. The researcher carefully examined the data to determine how the multiple pieces of information fit together and to perform a rigorous coding and analysis process to determine key themes. The researcher enhanced the reliability of the coding process by submitting the transcripts of interviews to the participants for verification before coding the transcripts, known as member checking (Creswell, 2015).

Trustworthiness

The researcher took various steps to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the study. One element of trustworthiness to consider is credibility or internal validity, which “deals with the question of how research findings match reality” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 242). To ensure study credibility, the researcher employed member checking, by giving the transcripts to each study participant for review so that they could determine whether or not their ideas were accurately
captured (Creswell, 2015). Maxwell (2013) noted that member checking “is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed” (pp. 126–127). The researcher also attended to her reflexivity through the use of a journal in which the researcher focused on how personal feelings or biases affected the interpretation of the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Another aspect of trustworthiness is reliability. Merriam & Tisdale (2016) explained that this term does not refer to “whether findings will be found again but whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (p. 251). One way that the researcher ensured reliability was through the use of an audit trail, which is a journal or other document that describes the processes that were followed throughout the study including “how the study was conducted and how the data were analyzed” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 253).

The researcher also increased trustworthiness by accounting for transferability or external validity, which “is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 253). This is commonly achieved through the use of thick and rich descriptions, which characterized this study (Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). Thick and rich descriptions offer practitioners and scholars consulting this study vivid details about the context of the study so that the they can determine how the research findings may apply to their particular work (Creswell, 2015). The inclusion of extensive quotes when documenting participant perceptions further enhanced descriptions and led to greater transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). To further enhance transferability, the researcher decided to use maximum variation sampling. In other words, the researcher, to the greatest extent
possible in the context of the designated research site, incorporated a diverse array of participants to increase the possibility that the readers would be able to apply the researcher’s findings to their particular setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to understand how parents of middle school students in an urban district in Massachusetts perceived their experiences creating relationships with their children’s school. The following research question guided the study: What are the experiences of families of youth attending a middle school in an urban school district in central Massachusetts in forming and sustaining family–school partnerships to enhance their involvement in their children’s education? Epstein’s (2010) family–school–community partnerships framework framed the study. This chapter includes participants’ profiles and presents the findings from the study.

Participants

Alisha

Alisha was a 36-year-old married African-American woman. She was married and was working full time as a teacher in a different school district. She had three children; two of her children were middle school students in the district. Her son was in seventh grade and her daughter was in fifth grade. She viewed education as very important and enjoyed helping her children with their academic growth and staying informed about what they were learning in school. She described her involvement with her children’s education as differing from her own mother’s involvement in her education. She stated, “I grew up with a single mother, so she worked a lot. So, involvement in school was minimal. . . . It’s a lot different because it is myself and my husband.”

Jennifer

Jennifer was a 39-year-old White woman. She was recently divorced and worked part time in the nutrition services department in the cafeteria of the school her children attended. She had two children who were middle school students in the district. Her daughter was in seventh grade and her
son was in fifth grade. Her son was on the Autism Spectrum and had a 504 education plan. She shared that her grandparents were supportive partners in her education; likewise, her children’s grandparents filled that role for her children. She also shared that her recent divorce impacted her level of involvement because it required her to seek employment outside of the home. She stated, “I have been a stay-at-home mom until this current school year, so I was really involved…whatever I could do, I did. Now it’s a little different because I’m working, but I still like to try and when I can to be involved.”

Elizabeth

Elizabeth was a 44-year-old married White woman who worked full time in the field of education. She had three children, all of whom were middle school students in the district. Her oldest daughter attended eighth grade and her younger son and daughter, twins, attended fifth grade. Her younger daughter had a diagnosed learning disability and received special education services. Her son had a 504 education plan. Elizabeth grew up in the district and attended the same elementary and middle schools as her children. She described herself as a very involved parents who liked to have frequent communication with her children’s teachers. Elizabeth noted both similarities and differences between her involvement with her children’s education and her parents’ involvement in her own education. She stated, “I’m not saying my parents weren’t involved, they were very involved but my mom was a stay-at-home mom and my dad was the breadwinner, and they didn’t go to PTO meetings. They just went to parent–teacher conferences, the bare necessities because it was up to the teachers.

Nina

Nina was a 30-year-old Asian woman who lived with a significant other and worked full time while also attending college. She had a step-daughter who attended fifth grade at the middle school
in the district. She described herself as a very involved parent and stated that she believed “it is important for families to be involved in their kids’ education and school itself.” Nina indicated that when she was in school, her mother spoke limited English, which affected her ability to provide academic support within the home. She noted, however, that her mother would help her to find resources that could help her with homework. Her mother’s example influenced her own involvement in her step-daughter’s education. She explained that she enjoyed helping her step-daughter with homework even if sometimes she was not familiar with some of the material. She shared, “We have educated her and encouraged her to utilize her resources when completing homework.”

**Juliana**

Juliana was a 28-year-old married woman who immigrated from Brazil the year prior to her interview and worked as a stay-at-home mom. She had two daughters and was expecting a third child. Her oldest daughter attended fifth grade at her middle school. Juliana spoke Portuguese exclusively, but indicated that she understood spoken English. When she first moved to the United States, she lived in a smaller community than she did at the time of the interviews. She shared that she valued education and enjoyed seeing her daughter succeed in school. She explained that she was somewhat involved in her daughter’s education, but noted that her linguistic differences, at times, made academic involvement difficult. She indicated that she wanted to be able to connect with her daughter’s school more often, but was not extended invitations to do so.

**Anne Marie**

Anne Marie was a 40-year-old married African-American woman who worked full time for a government agency. She had two sons who were both middle-school students in the district. One son was in seventh grade and her other son was in fifth grade. She expressed that she saw partnering
with teachers as beneficial to her children’s academic outcomes. She identified her father’s involvement in her own education as an influence on her involvement with her children. She stated, “My dad would go to my school all the time to the point where my teachers knew him by name and they had his phone number. . . . So I feel like I’ve kind of taken the roll of like more of my dad where I try to be involved.”

Diana

Diana was a 46-year-old Latina woman. She was a single mother and worked full time in a medical center. She had two sons: one was a fifth-grade middle-school student in the district. She shared that she viewed education as very important and tried to find opportunities for her sons to have educational experiences beyond the school setting. She reported that her parental involvement differed from that of her own mother’s involvement in her education because she found that her mother was much stricter in regards to homework expectations. She explained that while she viewed homework completion as a priority, she found it difficult to enforce rules about homework with her son and noted that she felt that this generation of children encounter many distractions, which interfere with their academic success.

Sandy

Sandy was a 31-year-old White woman who lived with her significant other and was a stay-at-home mom. She had four children; her oldest son was a fifth-grade middle school student in the district and received special education services. She explained that he was developmentally delayed, had ADHD, and was diagnosed with a sensory processing disorder. She described herself as an advocate for her son and noted that she viewed her level of parental involvement as differing from the level of parental involvement her mother had in her own education. She said, “I’m more involved.
My mom wasn’t. My mother was a single mother for both of us, and she did odds and ends to survive… Just my mom couldn’t read and write, so she wasn’t really involved.”

Katrina

Katrina was a 30-year-old Latina woman. She was married and worked full time as a secretary at a high school. She had four children; her oldest daughter was a fifth grade middle school student in the district. She and her husband grew up in the district and both attended the same middle school as their daughter. She explained that she had high educational expectations for her children. She compared her level of involvement to her parents’ involvement in her own education in this way, “My parents made an effort to come [into the school]. I saw that growing up and then, me as a parent, you always want to do a little bit better, like a step more than what your parents did for you.”

Themes

Five themes emerged through an analysis of the researcher’s discussions with study participants. The themes were: families experienced school communication efforts that were ineffective and limited in scope; families experienced difficulties when providing mathematical assistance within the home; families desired more direct access to school personnel; families encountered barriers which prevented them from participating in school-based opportunities for involvement; families experienced a range of interpersonal connections, which affected their level of comfort with the school. This section will present the participants’ experiences as they related to these themes.

Families Experienced School Communication Efforts That Were Ineffective and Limited in Scope

The participants described the methods the school used to communicate information to families. In their experiences, the school over relied on a narrow set of communication strategies,
which prevented them from being adequately informed of school happenings. The mothers identified methods they felt would more successfully align with their needs and preferences.

Nina described a variety of communication methods she felt could be more effectively embraced by the school to enhance the establishment of family–school partnerships. She explained:

I like to use the Remind App or having contact by email. I am always asking questions. I find myself calling the main office to confirm security situations. Facebook is a big resource that I rely on for updates.

When reflecting on how her experience with Smith Middle School could be improved to enhance family–school partnerships, Katrina indicated that the “biggest thing is communication.” She explained that the paper-based modes of communication that were often used to notify families of important information were not always the most effective. She said, “Sophia is at that age where she doesn’t give me everything that comes home. So, I mean things could be coming home, and I’m just missing them because she’s not giving it to me.” She shared that her preferred mode of communication would be email. She stated, “I work at a school so I’m busy throughout the day so usually email’s the best way of communicating.”

Jennifer, who worked in the Smith Middle School cafeteria explained that, despite being in the same building as her children every day, she was often unaware of important school information including upcoming events. She stated, “There’s not a lot of communication here about things, especially if you are not on Facebook. My kids will come home and tell me about a dance or an activity, and I will literally not have heard once of it.” She went on to suggest that:

Emails might be helpful, even with a flyer attached to the email . . . things like that might be a little helpful because we’re taking our kids at face value that there’s this going on, and we
may not know about it. I have two kids who go to school here, and I get two different stories sometimes.

Jennifer’s suggestion to allow parents to receive direct emails with electronic flyers attached related to a frustration some participants expressed about the school’s reliance on students to bring physical flyers home. Alisha stated, “I feel like I know less and less about what’s going on at school. . . . Flyers just get trashed. I never see them with my middle school children . . . Emails I would prefer.” Anne Marie shared a similar sentiment saying, “Flyers go in a backpack and they don’t always—they get lost in the shuffle . . . It’d be good if we had like emails or something so we know what’s going on.”

Diana explained that due to the way she and her son’s father shared custody, she was not always the first point of contact when her son came home from school. She explained that while her son was transitioning from school to two different households, some papers were misplaced along the way. She stated, “Any paperwork that is sent home to me, I don’t see it until a week later or two weeks later when it’s too late.” She explained that email would help to more effectively ensure that she receives information in a timely manner. She indicated, “Usually when I get an email, then I know what I’m looking for and what to ask him.” She went on to explain that:

Email would be nice because, like I said, I don’t usually get the paperwork, and I know that I’ve missed a lot of activities that the school has. Saturday things, sessions that they have in the library. You get a phone call, but there’s usually a flyer that I don’t see.

Like the other participants, Elizabeth expressed a desire to receive information through emails, but she also shared that she would like to receive information through automated calls. She indicated:
The Connect Eds, which I’ve complained about a lot, aren’t going on here. That drives me insane. I’ve said that since Sarah started. I’m like, give me a Connect Ed; send me a Connect Ed; send me an email; keep me involved. . . .You got to keep open lines of communication; you have to. That’s the key, parents feel welcome.

Anne Marie indicated that she received automated calls, but explained that she would prefer if the use of automated calls was expanded to also inform families of after-school, family-centered events. She mentioned:

If there is something like that going on in the school, they do call sometimes, but this is the thing about the call; they’ll call when it’s snowing, or they’ll call other stuff. But like, who really listens to the phone call? Cause, I probably should listen, they usually call about like school cancellations, or it’s going to be a half day next week. Okay. So, like, if I knew they were calling to give me information about school events, I might be more apt to listen. But if they, if it was announcements in addition to, then, you know, I’d probably listen more. Or if they just emailed and say, hey there’s going to be this event, that event.

When Sandy discussed her experiences with home–school communication, she shared an experience she had recently encountered in which she was unaware of the dates for state-mandated testing. She described how that particular lack of communication affected her ability to support her son’s academic success. She stated:

They need to be more on top of notifying parents of what is going on. That is a problem here. Pretty much a lot of schools are like that because it was like that over there [at the elementary school], so I am not just singling out. Notifying parents about things that are going on in the school like, MCAS. I like getting notified from like the phone thing. Whatever’s easier. But honestly, some people don’t always have the phone on top or their phone’s shut off or their
number is not in service or anything. Send a letter home. I really, truly thought that MCAS was really important for us parents to know to give them a good breakfast, to get them a good sleep last night. Last night, my son didn’t go to bed until after 10 o’clock. If I had known about MCAS I would’ve made sure that I watched him take his sleeping pill, and I wouldn’t have just given him cereal. I would have given him a better breakfast. When I talked to other parents, they were shocked. They had no clue when MCAS was.

Juliana viewed communication efforts through the lens of her linguistic background. Her evaluation of the school’s communication efforts further revealed the limited scope of the methods used by the school to share information with families. She stated:

When it comes home, normally there’s a side with Spanish and English. I have a preference for the English because it’s even easier than Spanish. My daughter can read what it says and translate it into English. Information over the phone is difficult because there is no one to translate.

This was perplexing to the participant because she indicated that there is a large Brazilian community in the city.

Throughout the interviews, the participants mentioned the need for the school to expand the scope of their home–school communication efforts to include a wider array of tools. Participants explained that the scope of communication efforts was limited. The school, the participants explained, typically relied on students to share information with parents, often through the use of flyers. Communication efforts were also limited to two languages, which prevented families who spoke other languages from receiving information in a way they could easily understand.
Families Experienced Difficulties When Providing Mathematical Assistance Within the Home

While participants expressed a desire to assist their children with homework, they frequently noted challenges that prevented them from providing the level of academic support they desired to provide within the home. In some instances, participants hesitated to assist with homework for fear that they would further confuse their children or turn homework time into a more stressful experience.

Many of the participants explained that assisting with math homework was especially difficult because of their own attitudes towards math and because the mathematical methods and strategies they were taught while in school differed from the methods and strategies their children were learning. Elizabeth stated, “I hate math because I stink at it and of course I don’t like the way it’s taught, obviously, because its changed. But that’s our biggest challenge is the math.” She later stated:

If I’m sitting there trying to do my multiplication how we were taught and I’m showing Sarah or Kate and Noah, they’re like “What are you doing Mommy? That’s not right.” And then they break it down like, “That’s not right. Mine is right, yours isn’t.”

She explained that the tools her youngest children’s math teacher provided did help to alleviate some of the challenges associated with math homework. She said, “Ms. Babson has the websites you can go to in her math packet.”

Alisha’s experience helping with math homework paralleled Elizabeth’s experience. She explained:

I think math was the most challenging because it changed. Like the way it’s taught changes. That’s my biggest concern. My daughter’s math teacher she’s really good with, she’ll send
home videos and stuff . . . I do like to see videos of things, because, I mean, I am good at math, but it’s just I don’t want to teach them differently than what they’re learning.

She provided an example of a recent experience she had with her daughter: “I was trying to show my daughter how to divide, and it was like totally different than what she’s learned.”

Jennifer’s experience was similar to the other mothers interviewed. She revealed:
To be honest with you, when it comes to homework, if they need help, they’re kind of screwed because things have changed so much from when I was in school. The math I couldn’t help you with. Math was never my strong suit. Math was never my strong suit in school, and the fact that they’ve changed it so much, it’s hard.

Diana’s thoughts about helping her son with math homework were similar to the other participants. She stated:
When he had his surgery, he brought his homework home and I did help him with some of it. He’s like, “That’s not how we do math now.” I’m thinking, “That’s how I . . . Oh, you do the number thing.” I had to Google how to do that. Then he’s like, “There is some web page you can go on.” We did it that way.

Juliana also felt that it was very difficult to assist her daughter with math homework. She explained that because she could not provide adequate math support at home, she found an alternative solution: “We chose to enroll her in the after-school program so that she had more support. It helps her with the homework that I wasn’t able to understand. She is able to ask the teachers for help there.”

Katrina described her experience with providing academic support to her daughter at home in this way:
We’ve never really had to sit down with her and do homework. I mean here and there she will ask questions, and I feel like a lot of the material they are learning now is stuff that we learned in high school, so when she does ask questions, most of the time I don’t know the answer, so me and my husband try to help her out as much as we can, and if not I usually just contact the teacher and just let them know.

Similar to the other mothers interviewed, Katrina explained that math proves to be the most challenging subject in which to provide assistance. She said, “Math was my weakness, and it seems to be like—I know in elementary she really enjoyed it, I think it’s getting a little tougher, so it’s definitely a challenge for her now.”

Nina’s experiences were similar to the other participants. She found that the math homework was the most difficult to provide assistance with. She stated, “She has a hard time with math. She does all the work in her head or assumes an answer is right because it looks like it. We informed her that we don’t always know how to help her.”

The participants’ discussions revealed their commitment to serving as partners in their children’s education by providing academic support within home through homework help. The mothers interviewed made themselves available to their children after school to answer questions or guide their children through homework completion, though, at times, there were factors that inhibited their efforts. Some of the participants identified tools provided by their children’s teachers, which helped them to more effectively assist their children with math.

**Families Desired More Direct Access to School Personnel**

Participants shared that they desired more direct access to teachers, whether electronically or through face-to-face contact. They expressed an interest in creating two-way channels of personal communication with their children’s teachers as a way of sharing and receiving information about
their children’s academic progress. The mothers described barriers they faced in gaining access to teachers.

Elizabeth described some confusion she experienced related to parent–teacher conferences when her oldest daughter transitioned from elementary to middle school. She explained:

The first year, when she was in fifth grade, we came to open house. It was great and then I’m like, “Why don’t we have parent–teacher conferences because at [the elementary school] you have to sign up for them?” It was right before Christmas and I’m like, I emailed like, “Oh, only if your child is not doing well.” Then I said, “Oh, okay. That’s different.” But I didn’t know that, you know what I mean?

She also explained that parents of her younger children’s classmates experienced similar confusion surrounding the parent–teacher conference policy at the school. She shared, “Even this year parents are, ‘Why don’t we have parent–teacher conferences.’ I said, ‘It’s only, they’ll contact you if they’re concerned about your child or what have you.’ And they’re like, ‘Oh, okay.’” She further explained that although the school typically reserved parent–teacher conferences for those students who were struggling, she was still interested in discussing her older daughter’s progress with her teachers. She said:

And even Sarah last year, like we just went, even though we didn’t have to, we still went and they’re like, “All right, we have nothing to talk about, but Sarah’s doing good.” But we’re just so programmed. We just want to be in communication.

Katrina also contacted her daughter’s teachers to schedule a parent–teacher conference. She explained that although her daughter excelled academically, she still wanted to engage in direct and personal interactions with her teachers. She said:
I feel like, as a parent, that’s always important. Whether you’re hearing bad information or good information, it’s always nice to hear good things and positive feedback about your kids. I look forward to that. I want to come to the school, and I want to hear how good she’s doing. I don’t want to be here only for, you know, because of bad behavior or poor decisions that she’s making. I don’t know; I feel it’s good for parents, that’s like a pat on the back, even if you don’t necessarily need to be here.

Similarly, Alisha shared that she did not feel that communication between teachers and parents should be limited to parents whose children are struggling academically. Alisha wanted to not only have direct contact with her children’s teachers, but she also desired to see the quality of the contact improve. She shared:

Part of me just wants to know like everything that’s going on with my kid, and I know that, typically, conferences aren’t scheduled unless like the teachers feel like they need to. So, it’s hard for me because unless I actively seek you out, I’m not hearing anything about what’s going on with my child. And then I know you guys are rushed, so then you feel like, “Let me just shut up, and okay.”

Juliana wanted to meet her daughter’s teachers and discuss her daughter’s academic progress, but was never extended an invitation. She shared, “We moved here November 1st, and she started on November 1st. We never received any communication from the school calling us here to talk with her teachers or meet her teachers.”

Anne Marie also wanted to connect with her children’s teachers. She noted that there were obstacles that made this connection more difficult. She expressed:

I wish I could have a more direct conversations with his teachers with certain things. When they were in elementary school, it was easier for me to email the teacher and they would email
me, and it was like, easy. And I’m not blaming the school. I’m kind of blaming myself as the parent. I feel like now that they’re in middle school, I can’t keep up with, like, the different teachers that they have. So, when I go to the school I be like, this is my name; this is my email; please call me if anything comes up. And then the way that the school is set up is kind of hard to even, like, go there and talk with the teachers because it’s like, everything is on lockdown. You know what I mean? So, it’s like, okay you’re like I would love to just like, pop in and be like, hey what’s going on? How’s everything going? But it’s kind of harder. And I don’t remember sometimes who all their teachers are.

Anne Marie further explained that besides the structure of the school making it difficult to access teachers, lack of information about who her sons’ teachers were and how to contact them further impeded communication. She reported:

I feel like if I wanted to share information with them, I could. I just feel like it’s kind of hard to sometimes, because I don’t always know who their teachers are. It’s like always changing. And so, I don’t; I can’t keep up with it. So, I feel like if they, if I give them my email and they email me I know, like I know I have math’s email. So, I can email his math teacher. But like, I don’t know who, like, the language arts teacher is. I’ve met her. But I can’t, I don’t remember.

Ann Marie shared a suggestion that she felt would assist in allowing her to experience her desired level of access to school personnel. She stated:

I wish they had a system. I know we have open house at the beginning of the year, but I really wish they had a system. And I know the teachers themselves; they’re parents, and they’re busy too, but I wish they had like a midyear open house. Like, you come in November, December. Why can’t I come in, like, March? You know?
Jennifer shared that “when it comes to actual conferences, I’ve not had any this year at all for either kid.” She explained that without access to school personnel through the use of parent teacher conferences, she sought to connect with her children’s teachers through the use of email. However, she shared that she experienced great difficulty when trying to directly access teachers through that particular mode of communication. She revealed:

I do for some reason to have a lot of trouble getting the emails correct. There are a lot of teachers in the system with the same last names, so if there was an easier way to access the emails, even if like you went on to the school website and saw something there that said “connect with seventh grade,” and it showed the seventh grade teachers. That might make it a little easier. The women in the office are incredible. You can call them, and they’ll give you what you need, but that takes away from them doing something else. It would definitely be easier if you know you could go to [the website] or whatever and just get a hold of people directly.

Sandy also experienced challenges when trying to connect with her son’s teacher electronically. Although she did not have trouble accessing teachers’ email addresses, she did note that she did not always get the responses she desired. She revealed that she frequently emailed one of her son’s teachers because he struggled in her class, but because of disagreements she had with this teacher at the beginning of the school year, she felt the teacher had detached from the parent-teacher relationship. She said:

You can see all my emails to Ms. Perry. She will not answer. Ms. Carson will. So, now what I do is I put a group message, so Ms. Perry knows that I am writing to her, but Ms. Carson will reply to me.
The participants’ responses demonstrated their commitment to connecting with their children’s teachers. School and individual teacher practices sometimes prevented parents from achieving the level of direct access they believed would benefit their children’s success.

**Families Encountered Barriers Which Prevented Them from Participating in School-Based Opportunities for Involvement**

Many of the parents interviewed were interested in engaging in family events, volunteer activities, and/or decision-making opportunities that occurred within the school building, and they shared the different ways that their various life demands impacted their ability to become involved in that capacity.

Sandy expressed interest in participating in opportunities for in-school involvement, but explained that there were challenges associated with that type of involvement. She said:

If it’s something really important where it’s going to change our kids—the kids—I would make it my point to find a babysitter, or even bring my kids along, where it’s something where I know the kids are going to benefit. But, it’s hard. I have a baby at home, so I can’t always just leave the baby. I can’t always get childcare

Diana shared that factors related to both time and money affected her ability to volunteer at school functions. She explained:

I actually was going to volunteer, but the hours that they needed at school, I’m at work. It’s hard for me to volunteer. The field trips, I would have to ask for the day off to volunteer. Should I ask for a day off, or should I go to work? That was my thinking. I don’t get—not that I should get paid, but I don’t get paid for this. Do I have enough vacation time?

She explained that she would rather use her vacation time to bring her family on trips that would be educational and would create lasting family memories. She said:
I was telling my son, I like to do a lot of things with him now that he’s young, and I try to get, like, we went to the Alamo in San Antonio. And we were looking at the old stuff that was in there, how they’re restoring it now—and the history of the Alamo. There was free admission, so I said, “Well, we’re going to go into the Alamo.” And I said, “Well, this is what the Alamo’s about.” And he, you know, he remembers hearing of the Alamo, and he knows stuff. Sometimes he acts like he doesn’t, but he was in there, and he was interested in it, and he thought it was really cool. Then they had this reenactment outside. I try to, whenever we go somewhere, I try to make sure that there’s history too, so that he has knowledge of that.

Jennifer, who was previously a stay-at-home mom explained that her recent shift to employment affected her ability to volunteer. She said:

If I wasn’t working at this point, I still would love to be able to do the involvement, like the book fairs and Christmas fairs because I like to when I can. Now I work here. It’s different. One of the women in charge [of the PTO] always reaches out and asks for my help with things, which I’d love to, but now that I work during the school hours, it’s not as easy for me to do it.

When asked about school-based involvement, Alisha described an experience similar to Jennifer’s. She stated:

My work hours. I did. When I was a stay-at-home mom, I used to do it. But not anymore. Well, I’m a teacher also, so I don’t have the time to help out during the day. So, that is really tough. And if there are things going on before like 5 o’clock I can’t. I just can’t do it. But if there were a night program there are no barriers. We literally live like right there.

Anne Marie indicated that, ideally, she would like volunteer opportunities to occur at night and center on problem solving school-related issues with other parents. She also explained how her
work demands impacted her ability to become involved in that capacity and how she felt her limited time would be most effectively spent:

I work full time. So, like, it depends if I had to go once a month. Yeah, I could do once a month. Once every 2 weeks, okay I can squeeze that. But yeah, I would be—it depends on things with my husband. Depends on the involvement. And I work. I think a lot of the moms are stay-at-home moms, which is great if you can do that. It’s fine. But for me it was like, okay like, if we’re going to come here, it needs to be about something, like not just like, oh the kids are, Easter’s coming up. It’s like, who cares? It’s coming up at my house; it’s coming up at your house; you do your own thing; you know what I mean?

Nina indicated that she was “interested in volunteering, but am currently not involved.” She explained that although she had a demanding schedule, it did not mean that she was disinterested in participating in school-based opportunities for parental involvement; if there were particular opportunities in which she could be involved, she would have needed to be notified so that she could adjust her schedule accordingly. She shared:

I am a full-time college student, and work full time, and per diem. My significant other works full time. I would like to be involved with the PTO to help with the activities for the school to hold. I am not sure how involved I would like to be with the decision-making process.

Katrina expressed an interest in participating in school-based opportunities for involvement, but explained that familial obligations prevented her from engaging. She said:

I feel like I am a very busy mom as it is, as far as things that we do after school, as far as sports and even just being a mom. It takes up a lot of my time so, I feel like I’m not as involved as I would like to be. I feel like once—I have two smaller children—so I feel like
maybe once they are older, I’ll definitely be able to volunteer more, but right now, it’s just
crazy.

She went on to explain that the school does provide opportunities for families to become involved in
decision-making opportunities, but that, at the time of the interview, participating in these
opportunities would not work well with her schedule. She stated:

They send out emails, especially the whole deciding on a new principal, so I see that they
want the community and parents to be involved as far as decisions go for schools, but I just
like I don’t have the time to actually sit there and be a part of it.

During her interview, Katrina explained that although maintaining a busy schedule for her
children prevented her from engaging in school-based opportunities for involvement, it was her way
of supporting her children’s academic and social growth and development, and it allowed her to be an
active participant in their lives. She described how keeping her middle-school daughter busy was an
important part of helping her to navigate through the challenges that are sometimes associated with
middle school. She explained:

I just think she’s becoming more of herself, from the change from elementary to middle
school. I feel like middle school is such a tough age. They’re trying to—they are at that
awkward stage; they’re trying to figure out who they are, so I’ve definitely seen a change.
She’s grown a lot more, which is kind of scary, but at the same time I guess it’s good. So,
I’ve just trying to be, I guess more involved and really know what’s going on around her, and
I kind of want to be—I don’t know, try to keep her busy, that way I know what’s going on at all times.

Elizabeth also explained that her children’s busy after-school schedule sometimes prevented
her from attending school-based events. During her interview, she explained that there was an
upcoming family program being held at the school that she was interested in attending with her children, but that she would not be able to attend because of her children’s extracurricular activities. She shared, “I want to come tomorrow night, but we can’t. Sarah’s got soccer at 7:30 out of town, and Kate’s got soccer at 6 o’clock. I think it would be amazing.”

Similarly, Jennifer explained that she would also enjoy attending family-centered activities at the school, but she acknowledged that her son and daughter’s extracurricular activities sometimes made this difficult. She indicated that she hasn’t attended family events “in the last 2 years. We had before at the elementary level, but we have other activities right now, girl scouts and sports. They are great activities that are offered and, in the past, they were really fun.” She indicated that whether through school-based events, extracurricular activities, or familial connections made at home, she valued time spent with her children. She said:

I love doing things as a family. At this level, I think if you don’t stay involved with your kids, you will lose them in that transition of now is a tough time, prepubescent middle school. It’s a huge time. I remember hating it myself, and now watching my kids go through it with social media, it’s hard.

Although participants may not be seen by school personnel within the school building, it is not indicative of parents’ desire to become involved, their commitment to their children’s success, or their attitudes towards the importance of education. Understanding the particular barriers that prevented parents from participating in school-based opportunities for involvement may help school personnel in determining how to better adjust events and volunteer opportunities to accommodate parents’ schedules.
Families Experienced a Range of Interpersonal Connections, Which Affected Their Level of Comfort with the School

The participants described both positive and negative interactions that affected their perceptions of the school’s culture and climate. They discussed both parent–teacher interactions and student–teacher interactions. The ways in which teachers connected with students and parents affected their level of comfort with the school.

Diana explained that her time within the school building had been limited, but she had experienced positive interpersonal connections:

I’ve only come in twice, I think. Orientation. Open house. I felt great because you’ve got welcomed by a lot of staff. Then I think the dog came around. My son liked that, the fact that that dog is here for support. I think it’s changed since my other son was here. I don’t know how many years ago that was. A long time ago. I think there’s more helping and more, “Hey. Do you need this? We have after school.” I think there’s just more choices now than there was when my eldest was in school.

Nina held a positive view of the school’s climate and culture as well. She shared an example of how the school’s principal fostered an inviting school environment that helped her to feel like a welcomed member of the school community during the summer prior to her daughter beginning fifth grade. She said:

The principal is always so helpful. We were late to the fifth grade ice cream social. We missed all the questions and answers. We went up to him and asked questions. He not only answered the questions. He gave us a personal tour of the school. Everyone I have met so far has been welcoming and helpful.
Her only suggestion for improvement was for the school to find ways to create an atmosphere that fostered relationships between parents and their children. She said that she would like to see the addition of “an after school program that has both kids and parents involved working on one project together.”

Katrina’s observation of the positive interpersonal connections the principal had with students influenced her opinion of the school’s overall atmosphere. She explained:

He’s such a great person inside and out. I don’t know, the love and the energy he has towards the students I can’t even explain it. It’s just so nice to see him so involved with the kids. I was definitely really sad when I heard that he’s leaving. He’s just so good. I don’t know. You don’t see that in a lot of principals.

Anne Marie also observed positive interpersonal connections between the principal and the students. In addition, she noted that the teachers further contributed to her view of the school as a caring community of educators. She shared her experiences:

Where I can see the school does well is the principal is very good. He’s a very nice principal. They care about, they do care about their students. That I can say. They care about their students. I know my kid goes there he feels part of a community. He feels like, you know. He had a—his guidance counselor called maybe a couple months ago. She called because I don’t know if he saw someone doing like, cutting, or whatever. So, he was like, oh let me try that, you know kids. I think he started like, kind of doing it, and so they were concerned. And so, she called me about it, and I was like, oh okay. And I said to her like, he’s fine. He doesn’t have like, home issues. He’s probably doing it because someone else is doing it. And she was like, you know what I know, I thought that. She’s like, I see what kind of kid he is and whatever. So, my point is that, the only reason why I bring it up is cause my point is, she
would have to already have, he would have already have to have a good connection. They would have to have a good connection for her to be like, you know I already kind of figured that but I knew I had to call you. So that made me think, okay well at least I know when he’s there that they have a really good, like, community of teachers and they care about the kids.

Elizabeth praised teachers’ efforts to help her children in two different instances, which helped her to feel more comfortable and at ease with Smith Middle School. She revealed:

I’ve had great experiences. Our oldest, Sarah is in eighth grade, and coming from fourth grade into fifth grade, I was very hesitant because of her stature. She’s very small; she’s still to this day is always small, she looks like she’s 10. I was extremely nervous because you just hear the things and in fifth grade; they’re still babies. That was a huge transition for me as well as a parent, but I think the school does a fantastic job with transitioning because I believe the fifth grade team still, I don’t want to say treats them like babies, but still understands that even though they are now technically in middle school, it’s still like they’re elementary. Gets that they’re still transitioning, it’s a huge transition. They’re still secluded from the others, the older kids as much as possible, which I think is fantastic. I know it’s impossible, but it’s still, it’s kept at a distance or an arm’s length, but I think it’s great.

Elizabeth went on to describe another circumstance in which she was very concerned about her younger daughter’s special education services. Despite her frustration with the circumstances, she acknowledged and appreciated the steps her teachers took to help provide assistance:

This is a whole other level by her IEP wasn’t at the school yet, and it was December, and my husband and I were concerned because of her learning disability; the teachers went above and beyond. I can’t say it enough, in regards to staying after school, giving her extra help, extra points.
In addition to the positive experiences she shared, Elizabeth also revealed that some of her interactions with school personnel left her feeling uneasy. She explained that she had contacted the school on multiple occasions to express her concerns about the number of fights that occurred between students at the school. She felt that, despite her conversations with administrators, her concerns remained unaddressed. She recounted:

I dropped [Sarah] off, and she calls me after school. She goes, “Mommy there was a really bad fight this morning, I had to go get the gym teacher because nobody knew what was happening.” It was between the two and three girls and a girl from high school came in. And I said, I was enraged, enraged, sent an email and I’m like, “I’m not, I’m not.” Because if, God forbid, anything happens to my children, as bystanders, I said, “This district would not like me too much.” She’s like, “Mommy, they were recording it.” And I’m like, Oh, that’s awful.” I said, “I’m sorry you had to see that.” And then Friday, was it Friday? One of the days last week, I think it was Friday or Thursday; Kate came home and said, “Mommy, there was a fight at school and lunch.” And I said, “This needs to stop.” Sarah doesn’t eat lunch in the cafeteria because it’s the beginning of the school year. There was a table full of people and they were throwing food and bumped into her. She hit the side of the table; there was chocolate milk all over. I said, “You want me to,” I said, “I’ll send a bill,” because I’m like, I don’t play. I hold kids accountable. I hold them accountable.

Elizabeth acknowledged that fights will occur at the middle-school level, but was frustrated that more steps were not taken to decrease the frequency with which they occurred. She shared her hope that school and district leaders could be more responsive to parent concerns when she said, “Just listen. Listen to us.”
Sandy also felt that school personnel could more effectively listen to parents and acknowledge their voices. Her frustrations related to her concern that her son was not receiving all of his special education services. She explained:

One of the teachers was just not following the IEP. Then I find out that [the special education teacher] over at the elementary school has had several mistakes. They have never brought their IEPs over to the middle school, and what she said was going to put on the IEP was never put in the IEP. So, there is a lot of miscommunication between the two schools. So, coming in here, my son’s IEP did not get started until January or February. So, I do not know who you blame. Do you blame elementary, or do you blame [the middle school]? But then, if you listen to me from the beginning, I already knew what I was told, and I was telling them, but they would not listen to me because they never got the papers from [the special education teacher] over there. Two other parents have said it to me. They said they were not following the IEP rule in this school and the same team.

Despite her frustrations, Sandy did indicate that she appreciated when she felt that a particular administrator was finally hearing her concerns. She explained:

Mr. Dillard—amazing. The other administrator was a snotty little thing. I really did not like her. The last IEP thing I had in March or beginning of April, beautiful. There was Mr. Dillard was just substituting. He listened to me and understood. He told me something about free books on here; there were other things that he told me. You could tell he wanted to help a person.

Sandy recalled interpersonal connections between her son and his teachers that were both positive and negative. She stated:
One of them is horrible. My son is a child that needs you to praise him up, talk quiet and calm to him, and not yell and scream, and that is what she does. The other teacher is fine, we have no problem with her.

Sandy went on to describe a recent incident in which one of her son’s teachers “ripped up his homework” because it was written in her handwriting. She explained that because of her son’s disability, she felt it was most appropriate for her son to give her the answers orally while she wrote them down. She said that this incident left her feeling “heartbroken.”

One year prior to her interview, Juliana immigrated to the United States from Brazil. She and her family first settled in a small town in Massachusetts but then moved to the larger city where her daughter attended school. She explained that she had many more interactions with the teachers and other parents at the school her daughter previously attended. She shared how those differences affected her perception of Smith Middle School:

We arrived here a year ago. I’m completing a year now in May. The first place we lived in we adapted easily. It was a small city, and the school was extremely welcoming and the community, despite not having a Brazilian community. The American community was very welcoming for a small city. When we moved here, we adapted easily because it was a bigger city, so there were more businesses. There’s also a Brazilian community here, so adapting was easier when we are talking about the city. But, when we’re talking about the school, well, there are more people, and we feel less welcomed. In the first school we had activities, like for example, a picnic after school. It was sponsored by the PTO, and it was normally on Friday, and even if I wasn’t able to speak English, I liked that you interacted with the teachers and with parents.
Alisha revealed that while she felt somewhat welcomed and comfortable with Smith Middle School, she felt that strong interpersonal connections between herself and school personnel had not been established. She said:

At a level I think it’s been welcoming. Other times I feel like I’m kind of like intruding in a way. I don’t know. It doesn’t feel so . . . I don’t know. I think it’s just this district may be different than other districts that I’ve been in. That could be it. It just doesn’t seem as inviting. But I don’t know if it’s because it’s so spread out. All the classrooms are basically in other places. When you first come in, people are pretty welcoming. It almost seemed like, at the other schools, everybody knew who everybody was. And like if I were walking into here, would anybody recognize that I’m a parent of so and so?

She went on to share that sometimes when interacting with teachers, “You feel rushed. Even the open house. It’s like I love to come in and see where they are, but it’s like I just feel half the time we’re ignored. I know that there’s other people, and it’s busy.”

Jennifer observed a range of interpersonal connections:

Some of the staff and the students are amazing and always have a smile on their face. There are some students who have the opposite of that. My kids have both been really, really lucky with having awesome teachers. Until this year, I’ve never heard a complaint about a teacher. One of my kids, well, seventh grade has a big problem with one of her teachers. She feels this teacher’s out to get her. I don’t think that’s exactly true. I think it’s more or less she needs to put in more effort or ask for help, but she’s intimidated by this teacher, so she isn’t asking for help. I encourage her. I’m like, “Listen, you need to get your grades up. You need to do what you can do.” But the teacher’s been really difficult with that.
Jennifer noted that, although she was not pleased with the interpersonal connection between her daughter and one of her teachers, she was happy with steps one of her son’s teachers had taken to establish a connection with him. She shared:

When teachers go that extra mile for the kids. That’s huge. Not a lot of teachers do.

Something great happened with my son’s teacher. He was one of the only well-behaved kids during a guest situation. She took the time and made a great little thing that said like “proud teacher.” Sent it home. That was huge for him. That one little thing that might have taken her an extra couple minutes at the end of her day was huge for him, and it still hangs on our fridge.

The participants did not describe the interpersonal parent–teacher or student–teacher connections in the same way. There was a range of connections described. Some individuals felt like welcomed members of the school community while others felt uneasy with how they were treated by staff or how their children we treated by staff. This variability provided insights as to those areas preventing relationships between parents and school personnel from flourishing while also highlighting those aspects that have led to successful partnerships.

Conclusion

Five themes were identified through data analysis: families experienced school communication efforts that were ineffective and limited in scope; families experienced difficulties when providing mathematical assistance within the home; families desired more direct access to school personnel; families encountered barriers which prevented them from participating in school-based opportunities for involvement; families experienced a range of interpersonal connections, which affected their level of comfort with the school. These themes helped to provide a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of families who attended Smith Middle School as they
attempted create and sustain family–school partnerships. These findings can help educators to understand those factors which inhibit or encourage the creation of these relationships, which can guide decisions regarding how to more effectively engage parents. Chapter 5 will include an interpretation of the results of this study as well as implications and suggestions for future research.
Chapter 5: Implications and Discussion

This chapter discusses the major findings and relates them to the literature and the theoretical framework. The implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research are also discussed. This study aimed to better understand families’ experiences forming family–school partnerships in one middle school in an urban district in Massachusetts.

Discussion of Major Findings

The following question guided this study: What are the experiences of families of youth attending a middle school in an urban school district in central Massachusetts in forming and sustaining family–school partnerships to enhance their involvement in their children’s education? The participants’ experiences were categorized into five themes: families experienced school communication efforts that were ineffective and limited in scope; families experienced difficulties when providing mathematical assistance within the home; families desired more direct access to school personnel; families encountered barriers which prevented them from participating in school-based opportunities for involvement; families experienced a range of interpersonal connections, which affected their level of comfort with the school.

Families Experienced School Communication Efforts That Were Ineffective and Limited in Scope

Repeatedly, the participants expressed that they were not notified about school happenings because the school used a limited number of communication tools to share information. In their experience, they found that their children were not able to accurately relay information to them, nor did they bring flyers from school to home consistently. Flyers, the participants reported, were the primary way in which the school chose to notify parents of important school information. It became clear, through the researcher’s discussions with participants, that they wanted the school to embrace
an array of technological tools to improve their communication efforts. The parents explained different reasons why they desired the use of certain types of communication methods. Linguistic barriers were also mentioned; the school limited communication efforts to only English and Spanish. Together, the participants’ responses underscored the need for schools to utilize multiple modes of communication. By drawing on a variety of available communication tools, the school could increase its effectiveness in reaching the hundreds of families who comprise the school community.

Based on the participants’ reported experiences, a lack of information prevented them from being fully aware of what was going on at school and inhibited them from participating in school events, signing their children up for activities, or making adjustments at home to prepare their children for school demands, such as state testing. The findings suggest that the use of ineffective communication methods prohibits families from increasing their involvement in their children’s schooling.

**Families Experienced Difficulties When Providing Mathematical Assistance Within the Home**

The participants reported experiencing challenges with providing their children with academic support within the home. Repeatedly, participants shared examples of instances in which they tried to help their children complete homework but faced obstacles because the mathematical problem-solving techniques their children had learned differed from what they learned during their own schooling. Some of the parents drew on resources such as videos or general internet searches to help them provide homework assistance. At times, their children’s teachers had recommended or provided these resources.

Some parents indicated that they struggled with math when they were in school, so their trepidations towards the subject of math coupled with new techniques for teaching and understanding math left them at a disadvantaged when trying to provide home-based academic support. The
experiences shared by the participants revealed that educational involvement in their children’s lives was a priority. Their ability to share stories and specific examples of the challenges they encountered when helping their children with homework demonstrated that the mothers were invested in their children’s education and made significant efforts to reinforce at home what their children learned at school.

The participants’ decisions to contact the teachers when especially difficult homework questions arose, or even their hesitation to provide assistance that could have further confused their children, suggested that they had not given up on their children’s academic success, but rather, sought ways to provide assistance to ensure that their children would experience positive academic outcomes.

**Families Desired More Direct Access to School Personnel**

The families included in this study shared that they wanted more direct access to school personnel. The participants revealed that there was confusion surrounding the school’s parent–teacher conference policy. Typically, the participants shared, teachers offered parent–teacher conferences only to those families who had a child about whom the teachers felt especially concerned. If a child was doing well academically and did not present any problem behaviors, his or her parents were not invited to meet with teachers. The participants explained that they viewed parent–teacher conferences as an essential component for creating and maintaining family–school partnerships and for staying informed of their child’s academic progress. Regardless of a student’s grades, parents expressed their desire to engage in conversations about their children. The participants also reported that they experienced barriers which prevented them from contacting their children’s teachers through email. This mode of communication provided a way for parents to
connect with teachers, ask questions, or share concerns. Email addresses, the parents reported, were not easily accessed, making it difficult for them to engage with teachers in this way.

**Families Encountered Barriers Which Prevented Them from Participating in School-Based Opportunities for Involvement**

The participants were asked questions that were designed to learn more about the experiences they had in regards to opportunities for involvement within the school building, including volunteering, engaging in the decision-making process, and attending family-centered events. The participants shared that they were interested in this type of involvement, but in their experience, the timing of these events did not work well with their schedules. Often times, the mothers explained that work schedules prevented them from coming to the school building during school hours. The mothers also explained that their children participated in a number of after-school activities, which prevented them from attending events held during the evening. To some, these responses may suggest a lack of parental involvement, but a closer examination of the mother’s reported experiences reveals that their inability to engage in this type of involvement demonstrates their true commitment and dedication to their children.

Even though the participants may not always have been consistently seen within the school building attending school-based events or volunteering, they exhibited a commitment to being involved in their children’s lives, especially as their children faced the challenges associated with being middle school students. As one participant explained, “I love doing things as a family. At this level, I think if you don’t stay involved with your kids, you will lose them in that [middle school] transition.” Through conversations with the researcher, the participants explained why they had their children actively involved in after school activities. While this prevented them from becoming involved in school-based opportunities for involvement, it demonstrated their interest in helping their
middle school children to develop their interests and grow in ways beyond their in-school scholastic endeavors.

**Families Experienced a Range of Interpersonal Connections, Which Affected Their Level of Comfort with the School**

The participants did not describe interpersonal connections displayed by school personnel in one way. The mothers reported varying experiences, which altered how they described the school’s culture and climate. One of the aspects of the school atmosphere that helped to strengthen family–school partnerships was the feeling that the teachers and school administrators created a welcoming school environment in which parents felt their children were cared for. The participants appreciated when school personnel took the time to make personal connections with themselves and their children. As one participant remarked, “They care about their students. I know my kid goes there he feels part of a community.” There is evidence to suggest that some staff members at the school successfully contributed to creating a positive school environment. Results indicate that families have also had experiences that caused them to view the school’s atmosphere as unwelcoming. This typically stemmed from participants’ feelings that their voices were not heard or respected. One participant simply stated, “Listen. Just listen to us.” The range of interpersonal connections described by the participants reveal the inconsistencies present in the school environment.

**Relating Findings to the Theoretical Framework**

Epstein (2010) created the family–school–community partnership framework. Within this framework, she outlined six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. The researcher of the present study used this framework to develop the interview protocol and to guide the overall research. The following section connects the major findings to this framework.
Type 1: Parenting

Parenting involves an exchange of information between families and educators in order to provide the most effective support for students’ academic growth in both the home and at school. The participants shared that they desired greater access to their children’s teachers through the use of email and/or parent–teacher conferences. The participants identified barriers to this level of access, such as a lack of invitations to parent–teacher conferences and not being able to locate teachers’ email addresses. Through these means, teachers could potentially learn more about students, their families, and how to best support them. Likewise, parents could gain clarification about instructional methods being used by their children’s teachers as well as the school’s norms and expectations.

In this framework, Type 1 involvement can also involve the use of workshops or other formats to strengthen parents’ knowledge about youth development. Participants did not mention the use of workshops or a desire to be included in workshops that would assist with parenting. The participants explained that they realized that middle school can be a challenging time for adolescents, and they had a clear understanding that staying involved in their children’s lives could help their children to navigate through these challenges. They appeared to have clear ideas about strategies that they felt would best support their children, which included participating in family activities and keeping their children involved in extracurricular activities.

Type 2: Communicating

Communicating refers to the development of systems that effectively relay information between school and home and vice versa. Epstein calls for two-way channels of communication to be established. During discussions with the researcher, parents frequently mentioned that they were often not informed of school events or students’ academic progress in a timely manner, if at all. The mothers called for the school to embrace technology to notify them of important information. They
explained that they felt their children were not at a developmentally appropriate stage to be responsible for sharing information with them. The parents in this study often mentioned that flyers, which the school frequently used, would easily get lost or ruined and rarely made it into their hands. One parent noted that a lack of information translated into her native language caused her to rely on her 12-year-old daughter to convey important information to her.

**Type 3: Volunteering**

Volunteering refers to opportunities for parents to provide assistance within the school and in other settings. Many of the participants expressed their desire to volunteer at their children’s school. The PTO offered opportunities to volunteer during the daytime hours when most of the participants worked. Some of the participants indicated that they would be more able to volunteer if they were invited to do so in the evening, after work hours. Some of the mothers noted that even moving opportunities to evening hours would not increase their ability to volunteer because they maintained busy extracurricular schedules for their children.

**Type 4: Learning at Home**

Learning at home refers to families assisting with homework and other learning activities, as well as helping their children with academic goal setting. Consistently, the mothers in this study shared that they believed that education was of utmost importance, and they acknowledged that their involvement in their children’s education was essential for their children’s success. However, they noted that providing academic assistance within the home was not always easy. They wanted to help their children but often were not confident with the homework material. They explained that computational strategies they perceived as simple appeared to be increasingly more complex because students were taught strategies that differed significantly from what they had learned when they were in middle school. According to this framework, schools can assist families’ efforts by providing
them with tools and resources to guide them when helping their children with homework. Four of the participants told the researcher that they used resources provided by their child’s teacher, which helped to make homework assistance easier.

**Type 5: Decision Making**

Type 5 involvement opens schools’ decision-making processes to parents. One parent mentioned that she was aware of an opportunity for parents to help select a new principal for the school, but indicated that her schedule did not allow her to participate in the process. Many of the participants did not identify opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, but they expressed interest in the possibility of becoming involved in this way. Like volunteering, the participants explained that they would not necessarily be able to commit to the time requirements that are often associated with this type of involvement. Barriers to involvement in the decision-making process included: work schedules, enrollment in college courses, childcare needs, extracurricular commitments, and a lack of information about decision-making opportunities.

**Type 6: Collaborating with the Community**

Finally, collaborating with the community refers to a school’s utilization of community resources to improve family–school partnership efforts. When asked about connecting with the community, participants did not discuss this term in relation to community resources as the framework suggests. Their perceptions of community related more to the overall school community and how they and their children fit within that community. The participants’ discussions focused more on the school’s atmosphere and whether or not they felt welcome.

**Relating Findings to the Literature**

Family–school partnerships are complex, multilayered, and dynamic relationships that involve a number of different kinds of interactions (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Hoover-Dempsey &
101

Sandler, 1995). The literature about family–school partnerships illuminates those factors which can encourage and discourage these kinds of partnerships from forming. The experiences of the individuals who participated in this study can help to extend existing knowledge about this topic. Together, the literature and the research findings presented in this study can contribute to the development of a more complete and robust understanding of family–school partnerships and the factors that influence their formation.

Effective communication between schools and families has been documented to be one of the most essential instruments for facilitating family–school partnerships (Epstein, 2011). Frequent communication between schools and families establishes relationships that convey a sense of trust and increase the likelihood that parents will participate in school activities (Francis et al., 2016). As Baker et al. (2016) explained, “parents feel they could be more involved by being more informed” (p. 171). It has been noted, however, that many schools employ ineffective communication strategies and often rely on children to relay important messages to parents, leading to inaccuracies in the information they receive (Baker et al., 2016; Reynolds et al., 2015; Williams & Sanchez, 2011). An additional barrier to communication efforts is a lack of information translated to the families’ native languages (Soutullo et al., 2016). The results of this study suggest that Smith Middle School’s communication efforts mimic these trends, thus preventing parents from becoming equal and valued stakeholders in the education of their children.

Scholars further explained that frequent and proactive discussions between parents and their children’s teachers allow families to become active problem solvers and partners in their children’s education (Baker et al., 2016; Reynolds et al., 2015). The participants’ responses revealed that these conversations were not part of the fabric of Smith Middle School, leaving certain families excluded from discussing their concerns, questions, and hopes for their children. It has also been noted in
research about family–school partnerships that when schools offer families the opportunity to talk to their children’s teachers through parent–teacher conferences, family members sometimes feel dissatisfied with the format and feel that they are not allowed enough time to engage in meaningful conservations about students (Kim, 2009). The results of this study confirm this concern, which indicates that Smith Middle School may need to revisit their parent–teacher conference policies and procedures to more appropriately foster discourse about how to best meet the needs of developing adolescents.

The interpersonal student–teacher and parent–teacher connections within a school also contribute to the formation of family–school partnerships (Kim, 2009, p. 88). A school’s atmosphere also has the potential to encourage or discourage dialogue between parents and school personnel. When families feel like welcomed members of the school community, strong bonds between schools and families can form, which can lead to positive outcomes for student success (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2016; Jeynes, 2012). Some of the participants mentioned that they felt encouraged and comforted when they perceived that teachers and administrators respected them and their children. This highlights those aspects of Smith Middle School that should be explored and examined more closely to determine how the positive and inviting characteristics of the school’s atmosphere may be exhibited by staff with greater consistency.

It has been well documented in the literature that school leaders have the potential to shape school climate and can play an integral role in whether or not parents become involved (Haines et al., 2015; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Trustworthiness, approachability, and a willingness to listen to parents have all been cited as attributes that families appreciate in school leaders (Sheldon et al., 2010). The school’s principal was praised by some of the participants in this study for possessing
similar qualities. This deserves greater attention and a consideration of how more individuals within the school could display these attributes.

Scholars have argued that it is necessary for educators to examine the ways in which elements of a school’s overall atmosphere could be improved to more effectively foster the connections between home and school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Kim, 2009). Lasater (2016) noted that when parents and teachers do not resolve previous conflicts, future communication tends to be strained, and it is difficult to establish a viable working relationship throughout the remaining school year. In addition, researchers have discovered that parents’ attempts to express opinions, ask questions, and advocate for their children are often dismissed as threatening, aggressive, or unfounded (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Good et al., 2010; Yull et al., 2014). Negative interactions between parents and school personnel, scholars have documented, can make parents feel isolated, marginalized, ignored, and devalued (Yoder & Lopez, 2013; Yull et al., 2014). Participants pointed to a number of instances in which they felt like valued members of the school community, but this study’s findings demonstrate that Smith Middle School can also exhibit those characteristics that make individuals feel silenced and discounted. Based on this information, the faculty of Smith Middle School may be interested in determining how the positive facets of the school’s environment could more broadly permeate the culture and climate of the school so that there is more uniformity across all families’ interactions and experiences with school personnel.

Another aspect of family–school partnerships is the academic assistance families provide within the home. Reynolds et al. (2015) explained that parents worry that they might impede their children’s academic progress by teaching their children methods and strategies that differ from what their children learned in school. The mothers who participated in this study disclosed that they regularly encountered this worry; they wanted to help their children, but they were not always well
acquainted with newer techniques that were presented to their children in school. Researchers have asserted that a way to combat families’ anxieties about providing at-home academic support is for schools to encourage parents to assist with homework even if they use a different strategy than what their children’s teacher has presented in class (Lewis et al., 2011). This suggestion coupled with findings from this study expose a challenge that Smith Middle School may need to grapple with as they determine how to better bridge the gaps that exist between two major spheres that impact students’ lives: home and school.

As previously stated in the literature review, scholars have asserted that “parents are concerned about their children’s education and the absence of their presence at their children’s school should not be interpreted as indifference or low educational value toward their children’s schooling” (Alexander et al., 2017, p. 176). The participants in this study embodied this sentiment. Whether through assisting their children with homework, attempting to more directly connect with their children’s teachers, or enrolling their children in extracurricular activities, the mothers interviewed demonstrated a deep dedication to nurturing their children’s well-being in all aspects of their development. Throughout their interviews, the mothers explained that if they were unable to volunteer, attend family events, or engage in decision-making opportunities within the school building, it was not because they lacked interest. Their absence at this type of school-based involvement could often be attributed to work schedules, childcare needs, or their children’s involvement in after school activities.

These barriers to school-based involvement paralleled those described by a number of authors who have studied family–school partnerships (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Luet, 2017; Murray et al., 2014; Turney & Kao, 2009; Williams & Sanchez, 2011). This is not a reason, however, to avoid extending invitations for involvement to parents. Kim (2009) cautioned educators against holding the
belief that families “do not have the time, interest, money, or energy to support what they are doing” within schools (p. 87).

**Implications**

When determining how to improve family–school partnership efforts, scholars recommend that schools implement a strategic plan for building relationships with parents (Good et al., 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). This plan, researchers assert, should not rely on a single approach or strategy. Rather, educators should develop a “menu of approaches,” which account for the “fluid and ever-changing nature of relationships” (Francis et al., 2016, p. 33). The findings of this study imply that developing a strategic plan, which includes a menu of approaches for more effectively engaging parents, would benefit the families of Smith Middle School. To develop this menu, researchers suggest that staff members set aside meeting time to collaboratively recognize existing barriers within the school environment to determine how these barriers may be addressed (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

The results of this study indicate that some successful efforts have been enacted within the school to foster relationships with parents, but these efforts have not been implemented with consistency across all staff. The collaborative development of a strategic plan could encourage staff members to share their techniques and strategies with their colleagues, which could potentially lead to more widespread, consistent relationship-building efforts. Some of the participants shared they had used resources, such as a math toolkit provided by their children’s teachers, to assist with homework. This is one example of an approach that could be shared by colleagues and included in a strategic plan to ensure that take-home educational resources are provided to all families.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that a menu of approaches for strengthening family–school partnerships should also include a variety of methods for
communicating with families. Parents in this study explained that they would like to have greater access to school personnel through the use of parent-teacher conferences. Therefore, it is suggested that opportunities for parent-teacher conferences should be expanded. Scholars have explained that parents increasingly prefer technology-based modes of communication (Goodall, 2016; Thompson, Mazer, & Flood Grady, 2015). However, researchers note that schools should not rely on one kind of technology to relay messages, nor should they assume that this is the only method that parents would like utilized. As Goodall (2016) explained, “Any choice of technology must be founded on knowledge of parental needs, capabilities to use and access technologies; therefore, no decision on the use of these should be taken without careful investigation and discussion with parents” (p. 127).

It is recommended that staff email addresses appear on the school’s website so that parents may more easily have direct access to school personnel. It is also recommended that Smith Middle School expands communication efforts to include materials that are translated from English into more than just Spanish.

Another component of a successful strategic plan for strengthening family–school partnerships is a formal method for obtaining and documenting input from parents about their needs and interests (Baker et al., 2016; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The findings of this study indicate that parents have clear ideas about aspects of the school that need improvement and are able to articulate possible solutions. Finding ways to include parents’ voices in the development of a strategic plan at Smith Middle School would help to ensure that the plan reflects what parents desire to see in viable school relationships. It would also allow parents’ voices to be heard and would convey to them that they are valued stakeholders—two areas of the school’s atmosphere that participants shared they would like to see improved. The opportunity for parents to share ideas for involvement would also allow them to identify those barriers which prevent them from participating
in school-based opportunities for involvement. Researchers have indicated that accounting for parents’ work schedules and childcare needs can increase parents’ school-based involvement (Baker et al., 2016; Francis et al., 2016; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Finally, a strategic plan for improving family–school partnerships at Smith Middle School could also incorporate students. Scholars have indicated that students are an important part of family–school partnerships and can help facilitate connections between home and school (Fishman & Nickerson, 2015; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Participants in this study explained that their children struggled to bring home flyers and share accurate information; the findings of this study imply that Smith Middle School should consider explicitly demonstrating to students how they can more effectively complete these tasks. The implications described in this section, taken as a whole, could provide important first steps in systematically enhancing family–school partnerships.

Limitations

There were several limitations identified in this interpretative phenomenological analysis. This study included a small sample size of nine participants, and all of the participants were females. The participants all came from one school in one district in Massachusetts. A qualitative research approach was taken to investigate the research question. This introduced a level of human interpretation when analyzing data, which can skew results. Voluntary bias is another limiting factor in this study. The individuals who volunteered to participate in this study may have held strong opinions about the topic of family–school partnerships. Consequently, the findings may only capture the specific experiences of those who were drawn to the recruitment flyer. Another limitation of this study was the researcher’s position as a faculty member at Smith Middle School. This may have caused participants to hesitate to answer the questions truthfully. This could also create a level of bias that would not necessarily be present if an outside researcher with no connection to the school
conducted the research. Further research could be conducted to account for these limitations so that the results could be more easily generalized to other urban middle schools.

**Future Research**

This study provides a foundational understanding of the topic of family–school partnerships in the chosen district. Future research could be conducted to expand understandings about this topic. Additional research could include a larger sample size. Also, participants from all of the district middle schools could be included. Greater attempts could be made to include male participants to determine how fatherhood may influence experiences and perceptions. Future research could be further expanded to include participants from similar districts across the state or country. Another future study could measure the effectiveness of the implementation of a family–school partnership initiative within the school. This initiative could be developed to include the recommendations suggested by the researcher of the present study. Longitudinal data could be collected to determine how changes in the policies and practices of the school could impact parents’ experiences over time. Finally, future research could include students’ perspectives to learn more about how family involvement in their education influences their motivation and interest in their academic outcomes.

**Conclusion**

Middle school is a time during which adolescents face a number of developmental changes, which can lead to increased instances of mental health issues and a decrease in academic achievement. When parents and educators work with each other to support students’ academic and social–emotional needs, children can more successfully navigate this vulnerable time in their lives and experience greater scholastic gains. Therefore, determining how to strengthen parent–teacher collaboration is important for children’s long-term success. While the benefits of establishing
family–school partnerships are well documented, barriers which prevent these relationships from flourishing still exist.

This study examined parents’ family–school partnership experiences in the context of an urban middle school in Massachusetts. The results of this study revealed information about the perceived barriers to establishing family–school partnerships expressed by parents and those aspects of the school community that successfully strengthen the connections between home and school. The findings of this study indicated that families experienced school communication efforts that were ineffective and limited in scope; families experienced difficulties when providing mathematical assistance within the home; families desired more direct access to school personnel; families encountered barriers, which prevented them from participating in school-based opportunities for involvement; families experienced a range of interpersonal connections, which affected their level of comfort with the school.

Research has the potential to shape policies and practices at the school, district, and national levels. The findings of this research can be used by educators and policy makers to enhance family–school partnership efforts. Based on the participant-driven recommendations included in this study, the research site may begin to alter practices to more effectively engage families and improve student success.

**Personal Reflection**

I chose to explore the topic of family–school partnerships because I sensed something wasn’t right in the school in which I work, but I couldn’t put my finger on the exact problem. A frequent complaint of teachers and administrators that reverberates in the halls of Smith Middle School is “parents just don’t care.” My colleagues and I have often lamented the lack of parent attendance at open house or other school events. Though we complained, we repeatedly failed to examine the root
causes of what we deemed to be a significant problem. It was easier to lay the blame on others than to admit our own failure to promote better family–school partnerships.

When I enrolled in the doctor of education program at Northeastern University, I knew I wanted to investigate this topic. Every time I had the opportunity to explore a topic of interest for an assignment, I chose to focus on family–school partnerships. Through my coursework, I realized that I needed to uncover how exactly we as educators contribute to strained or nonexistent relationships with parents. Through thought-provoking readings and discussions with my professors and others in my cohort, I began to challenge previously held notions and confront realities related to oppression, bias, and the strategic silencing of others. With each new piece of information, I found myself reflecting deeply about my interactions with families and considering the ways in which my role as a scholar–practitioner could help to improve the connections between school and home for a number of stakeholders.

As an introvert, the thought collecting data made me quite nervous. I wondered how participants would perceive me and the questions I would ask. I wondered if the participants would be honest with me, and if they were, how I would react in the face of possible criticism of my place of employment, my beloved colleagues, or even worse—myself. I conducted one of my first interviews in a participant’s home. I was terrified, especially when I was told that I would likely be greeted by a large, barking dog named Cookie . . . which I was. The experience of interviewing this mother was eye opening. Sitting on stools at her kitchen counter with her helped me to understand the true magnitude of the passion she had for her children’s education. She showed me the large poster she had hanging in her kitchen that outlined her children’s homework and chore schedule, and she proudly displayed the workbooks she purchased to supplement what her children were learning in school. Had I not been invited into her home; I would have never understood the true dedication this
woman had towards her children’s academic progress. At the end of the interview, she showed me beautiful pictures of her family’s trip to Belize. Sitting down with her turned out to be much more than a question-and-answer session; it was an opportunity for me to gain deeper insight into the life of a student who I would have otherwise only known at face value.

As the interviews continued, my dissertation became so much more than a final assignment I needed to finish before I could sport three additional letters after my name; it became a learning experience that has shaped me in ways I never realized it could. I waited with excited anticipation for each interview. I was eager to discover exactly what we could do at the school to improve families’ experiences. As I read over the statements from parents that I included in Chapter 4, I realized that, although I accurately captured what was said, there was no way to possibly portray all of the emotions associated with each interview. Some moments were marked by laughter, while others were marked by tears. Mothers also spoke with me off the record to share personal information that helped me appreciate them and their families, not as data points, but as people.

The worries I had about data collection quickly faded. My questions did not irritate or annoy parents as I once feared; in fact, parents happily shared their experiences with me, even if those experiences had sometimes been negative. The mothers rarely wanted to accept the gift of gratitude for being interviewed, and some flat out refused it. One mother said she wanted to buy me a gift card because she was so thrilled to have the opportunity to discuss her experiences.

Smith Middle School is entering a new era. In the upcoming school year, we will see many new administrators at both the school and district levels. The state of Massachusetts will become increasingly involved in the school because we have not been able to meet our state-mandated accountability standards. A central conversation surrounding this new era has been about how we can strengthen our connections with families. The timing of this dissertation will allow me to suggest
ideas for improvement that have been suggested by family members who reside in the district and who will be directly affected by the coming changes. My hope is that the results of this work will contribute to the school’s efforts to embrace families as valued partners in the education of children. I have a much more thorough understanding of why families, at times, feel dismissed, ignored, and sometimes disconnected from the school. I have also learned about the positive aspects of the school’s environment that families appreciate. It is essential that as we work to increase our accountability standards, we do not lose sight of those personal interactions which demonstrate that we are a nurturing community of educators who care deeply about children and their families.
References


Appendix A: Permission Letter

January 25, 2019

Northeastern University

RE: Marybeth Donlan

To whom it may concern:

I have received and reviewed Marybeth Donlan’s research proposal entitled “An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Family-School Partnerships in an Urban District.” She has permission to complete her research within the [redacted] Public School District.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Superintendent
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyers English and Spanish

CALLING PARENTS!

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact:
Marybeth Donlan, student researcher at Northeastern University
For more information: donlan.mh@huskymenu.edu or 978-503-7133.
Translation Services Available

$25 Dunkin Donuts Gift Card for Participating

¡LLAMADO A PADRES DE ENFERMERÍA!

Si eres padre de un estudiante de escuela media, puedes ser elegible para participar en un estudio sobre sus experiencias en la construcción de relaciones y conexiones con las Escuelas Públicas de... Los voluntarios participarán en una entrevista de una hora. Todas las entrevistas se llevarán a cabo en un lugar que te sea cómodo y conveniente.

Tarjeta de Regalo Dunkin Donuts de $20 por Participar

La información que compartes es valiosa.
Appendix C: Recruitment Letters English and Spanish

Dear Parents:

I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University (NEU) and I am working on my dissertation. I am asking that you consider volunteering to participate in a research study about involvement of the parents of middle school youth in their school life and education.

The title of the research study is An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Family–school Partnerships in an Urban District. The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding regarding relationships between parents and their children’s schools from the perspective of the parents. I am looking for volunteers for one individual interview to complete with the researcher. Each interview will take approximately one hour. All interviews will be held at a location that is comfortable and convenient for you.

Your participation is meaningful to the success of the research study, as we will have the opportunity to understand how parents are involved in an urban school. Your participation is entirely voluntary. I want you to know that confidentiality will be strictly adhered to, and I will use a different name for you in order to protect your identity and maintain confidentiality. In addition, the data collected will primarily be used for the student researcher’s doctoral thesis project, and potentially for future journal articles.

Please contact me by email at donlan.m@husky.neu.edu or call 978-503-7133 if you are interested in participating in this study.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Thank You,

Marybeth Donlan

Doctoral Candidate 2019

College of Professional Studies Northeastern University
Carta de selección

Estimados padres:

Soy estudiante de doctorado en la Northeastern University (NEU) y estoy trabajando en mi tesis doctoral. Les escribo para pedirles su participación voluntaria en un estudio de investigación sobre la implicación de los padres de jóvenes de la escuela secundaria media en la vida y educación escolar de sus hijos.

El título de este estudio de investigación es «Un análisis fenomenológico interpretativo de las asociaciones escuela-familia en un distrito urbano». La finalidad de este estudio es comprender mejor las relaciones entre los padres y las escuelas de sus hijos desde la perspectiva de los padres. Estoy buscando voluntarios para una entrevista individual para completar con un investigador. Cada entrevista tomará aproximadamente una hora. Todas las entrevistas tendrán lugar en un sitio que sea cómodo y conveniente para usted.

Su participación es importante para el éxito de este estudio de investigación, ya que tendremos oportunidad de entender cómo se involucran los padres en una escuela urbana. Su participación es completamente voluntaria. Deseo comunicarle que se mantendrá una estricta confidencialidad en todo momento, y que utilizaré un nombre diferente para usted para proteger su identidad y mantener la confidencialidad. Además, la información recopilada será utilizada principalmente para el proyecto de tesis doctoral del alumno investigador, y posiblemente en futuros artículos de revista.

Puede ponerse en contacto conmigo en donlan.m@husky.neu.edu o llamar al 978-503-7133 si está interesado/a en participar en este estudio.

Gracias por su atención y colaboración.

Gracias,

Marybeth Donlan

Candidata al Doctorado 2019

Facultad de Estudios profesionales de Northeastern University
Appendix D: Signed Informed Consent Form English, Spanish, and Portuguese

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Education Program

Name of Investigator(s): Primary Investigator: Dr. Sara Ewell; Co-Investigator: Marybeth Donlan

Title of Project: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Family-school Partnerships in an Urban District

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

I am inviting you to take part in a research study about the relationship between parents and their children’s schools, particularly your experiences with being involved in your child’s school life and education. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a parent of a middle school student in Worcester.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to determine how to improve partnerships between parents and staff in middle schools.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you will participate in an interview about family–school partnerships as a middle school parent. You will be asked a series of questions that will help the researcher to better understand what may or may not support the development and maintenance of family–school partnerships at the school.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview will last for about one hour. You will be interviewed at a location that is convenient for you. About one week after your interview you will be given the opportunity to review a transcript of the interview for accuracy and to make changes as you see fit. This could be done in person or electronically.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There will be no foreseeable risk to your participation in this study. Your identity will only be known to the researcher, and she will use a pseudonym in any written reports. All interview materials will be kept in a locked file at an off-site location and in a password protected DropBox file. The interview materials will be destroyed after that data collected has been analyzed.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help schools to improve relationships between parents and school personnel.

**Who will see the information about me?**

You are in no way obligated to take part in this study. You may simply decline to participate. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as part of this project. A pseudonym will be used when describing your responses in the study.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

You will not suffer any harm from this research. Your child will not suffer any harm from this research. Your identity, your child’s identity, and the name of the school and the district will remain confidential, known only to the researcher. No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of your participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have. If you quit, all data collected from you will be destroyed and not used in the study.
Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Marybeth Donlan, the person mainly responsible for the research, at donlan.m@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Dr. Sara Ewell, the Principal Investigator and Marybeth’s academic advisor, at s.ewell@northeastern.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

You will be given a $20 gift certificate to Dunkin Donuts as soon as a gift of gratitude for your time invested when you complete the interview.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

Your participation in this study will not cost you anything.

Is there anything else I need to know?

N/A

I agree to part in this research.

____________________________________________  ________________________  
Signature of person agreeing to take part   Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

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

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Formulario de consentimiento informado firmado

Northeastern University, Facultad de estudios profesionales, Programa de Doctor en Educación

Nombre del investigador o investigadores: Investigadora principal: Dra. Sara Ewell; Alumna investigadora: Marybeth Donlan

Título del proyecto: Un análisis fenomenológico interpretativo de las asociaciones escuela-familia en un distrito urbano

Consentimiento informado para participar en un estudio de investigación

Le invitamos a tomar parte en un estudio de investigación sobre la relación entre los padres y las escuelas de sus hijos, en concreto, sobre sus experiencias en la participación en la vida escolar y la educación de su hijo/a. Este formulario le describirá el proyecto, pero la investigadora se lo explicará primero más detalladamente. Podrá formularle cualquier pregunta que tenga. Cuando esté listo/a para tomar una decisión, puede comunicar a la investigadora si desea participar o no. No está obligado a participar en este estudio si no desea hacerlo. Si decide participar, la investigadora le pedirá que firme esta declaración y le dará una copia para que usted la guarde.

¿Por qué se me pide que participe en este estudio de investigación?

Le pedimos que participe en este estudio porque usted es padre o madre de un estudiante de educación secundaria media.

¿Por qué se lleva a cabo este estudio?

La finalidad de este estudio es determinar cómo mejorar las asociaciones entre padres y personal de las escuelas de secundaria media.

¿Qué me pedirán que haga?

Si decide tomar parte en este estudio, le pediremos que participe en una entrevista sobre las asociaciones familia-escuela como padre/madre de escuela secundaria media. Le haremos una serie de preguntas que ayudarán a la investigadora a entender lo que puede ayudar o no al desarrollo y mantenimiento de las asociaciones familia-escuela en los colegios.
¿Dónde tendrá lugar y cuánto tiempo me tomará?

La entrevista durará una hora. Le entrevistaremos en un lugar que le resulte conveniente. Una semana después de su entrevista, le daremos la oportunidad de revisar una transcripción de la entrevista para comprobar su exactitud y cambiar lo que crea necesario. Esto se podrá hacer en persona o de forma electrónica.

¿Me supondrá algún riesgo o molestia?

No habrá ningún riesgo previsible con su participación en este estudio. Tan solo la investigadora conocerá su identidad, y ella utilizará un pseudónimo en todos los informes escritos. Todos los materiales de la entrevista se guardarán en un archivo protegido en una ubicación sin conexión y en un archivo de Dropbox protegido con contraseña. Los materiales de la entrevista se destruirán después del análisis de los datos recopilados.

¿Me beneficiaré de participar en este estudio?

No hay un beneficio directo de su participación en este estudio. Sin embargo, la información aprendida con este estudio puede ayudar a las escuelas a mejorar las relaciones entre los padres y el personal escolar.

¿Quién verá la información sobre mí?

No está obligado de ningún modo a tomar parte en este estudio. Usted puede negarse a participar. Ningún informe o publicación empleará información que pueda identificarle de algún modo ni a usted ni a cualquier individuo partícipes en este proyecto. Se utilizará un pseudónimo para describir sus respuestas en el estudio.

¿Qué sucederá si esta investigación me causa algún daño?

Usted no sufrirá ningún daño con esta investigación. Su hijo/a no sufrirá ningún daño con esta investigación. Su identidad, la identidad de su hijo/a, y el nombre del colegio y del distrito serán confidenciales y solo serán conocidos por la investigadora. No se tomarán medidas especiales para la compensación o para el pago de tratamientos únicamente por su participación en este estudio.
¿Puedo dejar de participar en este estudio?

Su participación en este estudio de investigación es completamente voluntaria. Usted no tiene que participar si no lo desea y puede negarse a responder cualquier pregunta. Incluso si empieza el estudio, puede retirarse en cualquier momento. Si no participa o si decida retirarse, no perderá ningún derecho, beneficio o servicio que pueda tener de otro modo. Si se retira, toda la información recopilada de usted será destruida y no será utilizada en el estudio.

¿Con quién puedo ponerme en contacto si tengo preguntas o problemas?

Si tiene alguna pregunta sobre este estudio, puede ponerse en contacto con Marybeth Donlan, la responsable principal de este estudio, en donlan.m@husky.neu.edu. También puede ponerse en contacto con la doctora Sara Ewell, Investigadora principal y asesora académica de Marybeth, en el correo electrónico s.ewell@northeastern.edu.

¿A quién puedo contactar sobre mis derechos como participante?

Si tiene alguna pregunta sobre sus derechos en esta investigación, puede ponerse en contacto con Nan C. Regina, Directora, Protección en Investigación con Sujetos Humanos, buzón: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel.: 617.373.4588, correo electrónico: n.regina@neu.edu. Puede llamar de forma anónima si lo desea.

¿Me pagarán por mi participación?

Se le dará un cheque regalo de 20 $ de Dunkin Donuts como regalo de agradecimiento por su tiempo cuando haya finalizado la entrevista.

¿Me costará algo participar?

Su participación en este estudio no le supondrá ningún coste.

¿Hay algo más que deba saber?

N/A
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acepto participar en este estudio de investigación.</th>
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<td>Nombre de la persona anterior en letra de imprenta</td>
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Nome do(s) investigador(es): Investigador principal: Dra. Sara Ewell; Aluno pesquisador: Marybeth Donlan

Título do projeto: Uma análise fenomenológica interpretativa de parcerias entre Famílias e Escola em um distrito urbano

Consentimento informado para participar de um trabalho de pesquisa?
Estamos convidando você para participar de uma pesquisa sobre a relação entre os pais e as escolas dos filhos, particularmente suas experiências de envolvimento na vida escolar e na educação do seu filho. Este formulário lhe informará sobre o estudo, mas o pesquisador lhe explicará primeiro. Você pode fazer perguntas a essa pessoa, se tiver qualquer dúvida. Quando estiver pronto para tomar uma decisão, você pode dizer ao pesquisador se deseja participar ou não. Você não precisa participar, se não quiser. Se você decidir participar, o pesquisador pedirá que você assine esta declaração e lhe dará uma cópia para guardar.

Por que estou sendo convidado a participar deste estudo?
Você está sendo convidado a participar deste estudo porque é pai de um aluno do ensino médio.

Por que este estudo está sendo feito?
O objetivo desta pesquisa é determinar como melhorar parcerias entre pais e funcionários em escolas de ensino médio.

O que serei solicitado a fazer?
Se você decidir participar deste estudo, pedirei que você participe de uma entrevista sobre parcerias entre família e escola como pai/mãe de um aluno do ensino médio. Será feita uma série de perguntas que ajudarão o pesquisador a entender melhor o que pode ou não apoiar o desenvolvimento e a manutenção das parcerias entre família e escola, na escola.

Onde isso acontecerá e quanto tempo será necessário?
A entrevista durará cerca de uma hora. Você será entrevistado em um local conveniente para você. Cerca de uma semana após a entrevista, você terá a oportunidade de revisar a transcrição
da entrevista para garantir a precisão e fazer as alterações necessárias. Isso pode ser feito pessoalmente ou eletronicamente.

**Haverá algum risco ou desconforto para mim?**

Não haverá risco previsível para a sua participação neste estudo. Sua identidade só será conhecida pelo pesquisador e será usado um pseudônimo em qualquer relatório escrito. Todos os materiais da entrevista serão mantidos em um arquivo bloqueado em um local externo e em um arquivo do Dropbox protegido por senha. Os materiais da entrevista serão destruídos depois que os dados coletados forem analisados.

**Eu terei benefícios com a participação nesta pesquisa?**

Não haverá benefício direto para você participar do estudo. No entanto, as informações coletadas com este estudo podem ajudar as escolas a melhorar as relações entre os pais e o pessoal da escola.

**Quem vai ver as informações sobre mim?**

Você não é obrigado a participar deste estudo. Você pode simplesmente se recusar a participar. Nenhum relatório ou publicação usará informações que possam identificá-lo de maneira alguma ou indivíduo como parte deste projeto. Um pseudônimo será usado ao descrever suas respostas no estudo.

**O que acontecerá se eu sofrer algum dano com essa pesquisa?**

Você não sofrerá nenhum dano com essa pesquisa. Seu filho não sofrerá nenhum dano com essa pesquisa. Sua identidade, a identidade de seu filho e o nome da escola e do distrito permanecerão confidenciais, conhecidos apenas pelo pesquisador. Nenhum acordo especial será feito para compensação ou pagamento de tratamento somente por causa de sua participação nesta pesquisa.
**Posso interromper minha participação neste estudo?**

Sua participação nesta pesquisa é completamente voluntária. Você não precisa participar se não quiser e pode recusar-se a responder a qualquer pergunta. Mesmo se começar o estudo, você pode sair a qualquer momento. Se não participar ou se decidir desistir, não perderá direitos, benefícios ou serviços que teria. Se você sair, todos os dados coletados sobre você serão destruídos e não serão usados no estudo.

**Quem posso contatar se tiver dúvidas ou problemas?**

Se você tiver alguma dúvida sobre este estudo, sinta-se à vontade para entrar em contato com Marybeth Donlan, a pessoa responsável pela pesquisa, pelo e-mail donlan.m@husky.neu.edu. Você também pode entrar em contato com a Dra. Sara Ewell, pesquisadora principal e consultora acadêmica da Marybeth, pelo e-mail s.ewell@northeastern.edu.

**Quem posso contatar sobre meus direitos como participante?**

Se tiver alguma dúvida sobre seus direitos nesta pesquisa, você pode entrar em contato com Nan C. Regina, Diretora de Proteção de Pesquisa com Seres Humanos, Caixa de correspondência: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel.: 617.373.4588, E-mail: n.regina@neu.edu. Você pode ligar anonimamente, se desejar.

**Eu serei pago pela minha participação?**

Você receberá um vale-presente de US$ 20 da Dunkin Donuts como um sinal de gratidão pelo tempo investido para concluir a entrevista.

**Vai me custar alguma coisa para participar?**

Sua participação neste estudo não lhe custará nada.

**Há mais alguma coisa que eu preciso saber?**

N/D
Eu concordo em participar desta pesquisa.

Assinatura da pessoa que concorda em participar  

Nome impresso da pessoa acima

Assinatura da pessoa que explicou o estudo ao participante acima e obteve o consentimento  

Nome impresso da pessoa acima
Appendix E: Interview Questions and Protocol

**Topic**: Family–school Partnerships in an Urban District

**Institution**: Northeastern University College of Professional Studies

**Interviewer**: Marybeth Donlan, Student Researcher

**Interviewee Pseudonym**: ____________________________

**Date & Time of Interview**: __________________________

**Interview Location**: ____________________________

**Opening Remarks to Participant**:

Thank you for participating in this research study designed to explore parents’ perspectives about family–school partnerships. As you know, I am Marybeth Donlan and I am the student researcher conducting this study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctorate in education at Northeastern University. This interview should take about 60 minutes. Before I begin with questions, I will review the study details with you. Please know that I value your experiences and your willingness to share them with me, and your responses are very important to me.

First, I want to assure you that all your responses are confidential. I will use a pseudonym on all research documents and materials and in all publications about this research study, and I will not include any information in any documentation that could reveal your identity.

Second, I will record this interview using a digital recording device and I will use a transcription service to have this interview transcribed. I will also take notes during the interview to help me remember key ideas from your responses. All my notes and the information given to the transcription service will use your pseudonym. I will e-mail you a copy of the transcript for your review one week from today.

Third, before we can proceed with the interview, I must comply with Northeastern University’s human-subjects requirements which state that I have to obtain a written, signed consent form. There will be two exact copies – one for the university and one for your personal records. This form will reassure both you and the institution that your confidentiality will be maintained, that your participation is voluntary, that you can withdraw from this study at any time, and that I guarantee that no harm will be caused to you or the university as a result of this interview. [Go through the informed consent form with the interviewee.] Do you have any questions?
Finally, if you need me to repeat or rephrase any questions during the interview, please just let me know and I will be happy to do so. As you know, I expect that this interview will last no more than 60 minutes, and I believe that will provide me sufficient time to cover this subject with you. If we start to get close to 60 minutes, and in respect for your time, I might interrupt so that we can move on. If you are uncomfortable with any questions, please feel free to let me know.

If all of this is acceptable to you, I will turn on the recorder and ask you to affirm your consent once the recorder is turned on. [Wait for acceptance.]

**Turn on Recorder:** The recorder is now on. Today’s date is [current date] and I am Marybeth Donlan. I will be interviewing [participant’s pseudonym], a parent in the [pseudonym] district.

To confirm your voluntary participation in this research study and to accept digital recording of this interview, please state your pseudonym and say “I Accept”. [Wait for response]

Do you have any questions for me before we begin? [Wait for response and respond to questions as applicable.]

**Interview Questions:**

Please begin by telling me a little bit about yourself and your family and more specifically about your child who attends middle school in this district.

If you feel comfortable, please describe your own experiences with your parents’ involvement in your school and in your education when you were in middle school. Or if another friend or family member was involved, please describe that too.

Please describe the environment or atmosphere of the school your child(ren) attend.

Family–school partnerships are defined differently by different people. How do you define the partnership between families and schools? Or, in other words, could you describe your they ways in which you interact and are involved with your child’s school and school activities? Can you talk about your involvement in your child’s education at home?

As your child transitioned from elementary school to middle school, did you notice changes in your partnership with the school or your involvement in your child’s education? If so, can you please describe those changes?
How do you feel your role as a parent has changed in response to your student being a middle schooler? How is your relationship with your child changing, particularly related to school?

There are six different types of involvement that have been associated with family school partnerships. At this time, I am going to go through those different types of involvement and have you describe your experiences with each one at your child’s school.

The first type of involvement refers to exchanging ideas so that you can support the school and so the school can support you as a parent. During the time your child has attended middle school, do you feel you have been able share information with the school so that teachers can better support your child? Has the school provided you will information to help you support your child? Can you describe how that happens and things that are working for you, was well as those things that you would like to change?

Another aspect of family–school partnerships is communication. What are your thoughts or experiences with communicating with the teachers and/or administration at your child’s school?

Involving parents in the decision-making processes of a school is another way in which parents can partner with schools. Are you interested in being involved in the decision-making processes at your child’s school? If so, can you describe how you have been involved or ways that you like to be more involved?

Another type of involvement refers to the academic support provided in the home environment. Can you tell me about the ways in which you are able to support your child’s academic growth at home? What are the challenges you experience with providing academic support at home?

Opportunities to volunteer is another aspect of family–school partnerships. Are you able to or interested in volunteering at the school? If so, does the school provide volunteer opportunities and can you describe your involvement?

The final aspect of family–school partnerships is collaborating with the community. Can you describe any examples how the school utilizes community resources to support parents?

I would like to know more about your experiences with parent teacher conferences. Have you been able to attend parent teacher conferences? How did they go? How would you describe your interactions with the teachers?

Do you find that parent teacher conferences are an effective way to learn about your child’s academic progress? How so?

Are you aware of any family activities that are held by the district? Have you attended any of these activities? If so, can you please describe you experience with these activities?

Please describe any experiences you have had with the school’s Parent Teacher Association.
Please describe any experiences you have had with the district’s parent information center.

In what ways do you perceive that the school supports the establishment of family–school partnerships? In other words, what does the school do to encourage you to become involved at school and with extracurricular activities? How could the school better facilitate your involvement in the education and school-related activities of your child?

What barriers to establishing a partnership with your child’s school have you experienced?

Are there any ways you feel the school could better support you to more effectively partner with teachers and administrators?

Are there any other thoughts about family–school partnerships you would like to share at this time?

If you feel comfortable telling me, is there anyone who you would suggest as another parent who may be interested in participating in this study?

Do you have any questions for the researcher?

Thank you for your time and participation.