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Creating Collaborative Parent-Teacher Learning Environments in an English Language Learner Setting

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by

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Introduction

"What is the most underused resource in education today? Parents." Lauren Barlis summed up one of the most crucial points in education today. Parent involvement is at the heart of creating the best opportunity for our kids to succeed. Creating the most effective learning environment for our students' education continues to be a critical point of interest in the education world. The relationships in a learning environment help identify its strengths and weaknesses. These relationships can be identified as student-teacher, teacher-parent, and student-parent. When examining these relationships further, one may notice that parent falls under this category twice. In education it is commonly known and stressed that parents are important in a child's education. However, when we look to this point of parental influence, many shortcomings are visible. The roles parents hold within our education system are very important, yet we have limitations that hinder support for possible strong relationships.

Parental involvement in education can be identified in two ways, involvement in schools and involvement at home. The involvement that happens in schools refers to the parent-teacher communication (conferences, parent nights, other volunteer opportunities and school functions). The second type of parental involvement involves the relationships at home, more specifically

the help students receive from parents on school work, the value expressed by parents about

school, and guidance around academics. Research has shown the positive effects that parental

involvement has on a child's education. Positive parental involvement is associated with better

student attendance, higher math and reading scores, higher graduation rates, parent and student

satisfaction and fewer discipline problems (Larocuque, et al., 2011). However, to form the most

beneficial relationship between parents and schools, many limitations must be addressed.

Throughout my educational experiences, I have encountered many common obstacles

that inhibit positive parental influence in a school setting. Generally, factors including

single-parent households, work hours, and lack of resources can lead to a more negative parent

influence in school. These factors must be highlighted in order for educators and parents to work

and improve parental influence. While I am interested in parent involvement across schools, in

this capstone, I'm focusing on a specific population - ELL (English Language Learner) families.

I believe these families face even more challenges than do other families in forming and

stabilizing positive parental involvement in schools.

Although US public schools have become more culturally diverse with immigrant

families, in many instances the educational field has remained homogeneous (Malone, 2015).

The school system often continues to approach families and their involvement without

considering the makeup and cultural norms of those families. If parental involvement is one of

the key factors in improving student achievement, schools need to accommodate the families they work with. Since the ELL population is increasing nationwide, schools must take the time to understand and build relationships with those families they serve.

Over the past nine years I have developed a strong belief in supporting our ELL families. As a teacher and now administrator in an ELL school I have been shaped by my experiences getting to know these dynamic students and their families. Over these years I've been saddened by the number of relationships between parents and schools that have fractured due to misunderstandings and miscommunications. An ELL school environment encounters obstacles not necessarily found in other educational settings. Teachers focus on what's best for their students, yet tend to fall short when communicating their concerns with parents. Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, stereotypes, lack of familiarity with the American educational system, and varying educational levels among parents are all examples of problems in the ELL setting. When trying to establish positive collaborative communities we need to examine not only what the family brings, but also what we as American educators can do to lower these barriers.

My passion for ELL environments has been fostered by my involvement in a charter school in north Minneapolis. For the security of this capstone, I'll refer to the school as School A. School A is in its ninth year. It is part of a charter school district made up of eight unique

programs serving specific student populations around the Twin Cities. For example, within the charter school district there is a sober high school that serves students who are recovered or recovering from addiction, a JROTC middles school that serves those interested in joining the armed forces, and my program that serves the Somali community.

In the past 9 years, our student population has remained nearly 100% Somali. As the Somali population continues to increase at a very rapid pace in the Twin Cities our student population has increased significantly. We continue to get a large number of refugee families every year. In our first few years we had approximately 150 students enrolled; the last few years this has risen rapidly. For the 2015-16 school year we have roughly 375 students. The Somali population continues to rise as families flee Somalia's civil war. Some students were born in the US to refugee parents, while a significant number of the student population are refugees themselves. This creates a unique dynamic and division among students who to an outsider seem to all be "Somali".

School A has a 95% ELL population and 97% are participants in the Federal Free/Reduced priced lunch program. The staff at School A has 46 individuals but only 10 are Somali. Unfortunately, of those 10 only two are licensed teachers and the others fulfill auxiliary roles.

School A is K-8 environment with two classes per grade level. In addition to the standard grade level classrooms, we have begun piloting a Newcomer program this school year. This program has two specialized classrooms solely for students who have immigrated to the United States from Africa in the last few months. The rooms are mixed-level classes comprised of students in the standard 3rd-5th grade and 6th-8th grade age ranges. Currently we have approximately 50 3rd-8th grade students enrolled in this program. Students in kindergarten, first, and second grades who are new to the country are placed in a standard classroom since academically they are not as far behind.

In 2015 the Minnesota Department of Education designated School A as a Priority school. This designation resulted from a drop in test scores. This drop occurred when the school relocated from Hiawatha Ave. to the north side of Minneapolis and enrollment increased from 150 to 300. We are now working with the Department of Education on plans to address our large numbers, varying levels of educational exposure prior to arriving at our school, and wide range of ELL abilities.

The unique dynamics at School A effect parents and teachers in many ways and contribute to the struggle of creating strong positive relationships. Many parents at School A have had no previous exposure to American education. In addition to not understanding the American educational structure, many parents have not had any formal education themselves.

Parents that do have an educational background typically were educated in Somalia or other parts of Africa and have had very different experiences than those in the US.

There are strong differences between the educational system of America compared to Somalia. Families expect any exposure to learning and aspect directly related to a child's education to occur during the school day. The teacher is viewed as a respected elder of the family and is expected to take care of all issues whether academically or behaviorally in the school without help from families. Academic and behavior problems that involve contacting parents are typically handled by parents with corporal punishments and/or threats of severe consequences. Unfortunately, the threat of being "sent back" to Somalia is common statement that I've heard from parents in an attempt to correct problem behavior. These threats and punishments tend to lead to fear but, more often than not, no real sustained behavior change is seen at school. This also creates a new struggle for teachers who are working to help students understand the need for a change in their behavior, but students who are used to threats from parents tend to see this approach as the teacher not having any real control. Teachers are then forced to balance involving parents and being seen as an authority by the student even though they are not using threats.

While parents struggle with lack of familiarity and language, teachers also come to this environment with significant barriers. Thinking back to our college education programs we

realize there aren't specific classes to help us learn how to effectively and supportively work with ELL families. Teachers aren't trained on how to establish relationships with different families, how to engage families despite cultural differences, or how to relay information effectively to a parent despite language barriers. At School A, veteran teachers and administrators do our best to provide some education to new staff members about cultural differences and our population. However, this skill is learned through experience, willingness to learn, and trial and error. My hope is to explore how to establish a clearer understanding for both educators and parents about how to create the most effective way to build strong relationships within our ELL school settings.

Parent's involvement within the school and their continued positive relationship at home with their child has continually proven to raise academic achievement in the lives of students. Creating a learning environment that encourages achievement inside and outside of the classroom is very crucial to our students' success. Without strong parental influence and support students lose an aspect of learning that could lead to many positive achievements in the future.

With the knowledge of the importance of parental involvement, my school has begun to take small steps to establish stronger parent/teacher relationships. We organize Title 1 nights where families learn about different activities they can incorporate into their routine at home to support their student's learning. Also, there is a parent liaison on staff that continues to bridge

the gap between teachers and parents. The liaison, who is a Somali man, works to ensure parents

are informed of events at school, are notified of problems, and have the opportunity to meet with

teachers and/or administrators to discuss concerns, and are engaged in the greater community of

the school. At a practical level the parent liaison works to ensure families have access to

fliers/letters/etc in their language, have transportation to and from events, and know how to use

the resources available. While thinking about these steps that we've taken, it continues to

concern me that there is more we should be doing to support our students and their parents. With

this in mind, for this paper, I am hoping to learn from the experiences of these families to help

highlight the barriers that exist when it comes to parental involvement in an ELL setting.

Learning through experience is the best way to move forward. I've found that many times

in my work in education, and in the research, discussions on parent involvement in the ELL

setting are usually only when a so called "expert" is explaining what schools should do.

Common suggestions such as translators, transportation, and understanding more about one's

culture are very important and will be noted throughout this capstone. However, I feel that by

turning to the "experts" in the field, we are missing the vital information that our families, who

are living this experience, have to share with us. More specifically I want to see how families can

teach each other about the importance of parental involvement and the understanding of

American schools.

As you will read, I first wanted to get an idea of what our teachers and parents think about this topic. I used interviews/surveys to gain insight into what positives and negatives our families and teachers have experienced and see in our system. In addition to these individual formats for gaining information, I wanted to set up a parent discussion forum. This discussion forum would be made up of families that have lived through the experiences of having their children in the US school system as well as families that have just arrived in the country. My hope is that our families will be able to learn more through discussion with each other about similar difficulties.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The education landscape in America continues to change. Educators are constantly exploring new teaching strategies and curriculum with the hope of improving academic achievement. The achievement gap and rank in achievement compared to other countries place a stress among educators and politicians in our fast-paced society. Research continues to be done in order to pinpoint the problem in education and fix it quickly. With this fast-paced approach, the depth of research falls short. When looking at creating change, we must not succumb to the notion of a "quick fix" but rather approach research and implementation from a quality and longevity standpoint.

In this literature review I will explore the current research around parent involvement in schools throughout the United States. I'll identify the benefits of having strong parent/teacher collaborative relationships. Next, I will consider the changing demographics in our students today. I'll look to the factors that are affecting student populations, specifically regarding families and their engagement in the educational system. Moving forward I will look at the common strategies found in research done thus far on how to improve parent-teacher collaboration in an ELL setting. Finally, I'll explore the Somali population specifically in reference to the study I've conducted throughout this capstone.

Importance of Parent Involvement

Parent involvement continues to be identified as a key marker for academic achievement. In today's society lawmakers are rapidly looking for a component to help raise academic achievement, yet parent involvement is too often overlooked. The importance of parents

involved in their children's education should be at the forefront of social concern. (Yoder &

Lopez, 2013). It seems to be something so basic, yet it has been overlooked by those striving to

find the answer to increasing academic achievement. Curriculum and teaching strategies are

important. However, the idea of being able to connect learning at school and home must be

supported. Youth are positively impacted when the link between school environment and home

environment is consistent and cohesive.

During youth development, with new social complexities and increased responsibilities, a

connected home-school environment is critical for educational success.(Yoder & Lopez 2013)

The school day rarely gives enough time for a student to become a master of their studies.

Research has continued to show an overarching increase in student achievement when strong

parent involvement is present. Aspects such as increasing student attendance, increasing

graduation rates, and a positive improvement in math and reading scores have all been correlated

with strong, school-to-home relationships. (Larocque et al., 2011) Additionally, other behavioral

concerns can be improved based on the amount of parental involvement. The quality of

education students receive beyond just achievement can be affected. It has been associated with

non-academic elements such as parent and student satisfaction with school and fewer discipline

problems as well as positive attitudes and more effective programs at schools.(Larocque et al.,

2011)

Parent involvement has benefits for families beyond children's concrete academic

achievement as well. Families tend to become better informed about teachers' objectives and the

needs of their children. They can communicate with their children at home about their successes

and day-to-day life at school. Parents develop more positive attitudes towards the teachers. These

positive attitudes can translate into more positive discussions at home about interactions with the teacher. All of this creates a greater sense of community. Most importantly, increased parental involvement has been associated with parents developing higher educational aspirations for their children.

<u>School-Family Compacts</u>

Henderson (2011) provides a great example of how three struggling schools can make change by focusing on parent involvement. With student achievement being the goal, Henderson (2011) outlined how parents, school staff, and students all have responsibilities. It was necessary for parents, teachers, and students to all be on the same track so a clear forum of communication could be established. Henderson explained how school compacts helped form this collaboration. "Creating the compact became a catalyst for authentic school-parent cooperation" (Henderson p.48, 2011).

In Connecticut, three schools aimed to strengthen this relationship and make plans for better partnership among those involved. Henderson shows in depth what techniques were used to help parents better support their children with schoolwork. Teachers helped educate parents on specific reading strategies they could use with their kids at home. Resources, like reading materials, were passed out during the school's frequent family nights. Collaborative discussions among teachers and parents took place regularly in order to increase student achievement. The use of back and forth discussion among teachers and parents helped create a sense of clarity for both parties. Teachers were able to express their expectations for students in class. At the same time, parents were able to express their expectations of the teacher. This common understanding and open communication fostered a sense of community. Plans were developed by teachers,

parents, and students to have clear expectations of how to help one another move forward. These plans were a direct result of input from all parties and helped build a sense of connection and shared purpose.

ELL Family Involvement

The successful components of strong parent involvement capture all learners. When there is a strong sense of community and communication, all students, no matter their ability or ethnicity, can benefit from these positive influences. Shim (2013) highlighted again that when relationships are established with families, students benefit. Students become motivated when they observe their parents taking an active interest in school because parent involvement communicates to students how important they are to their parents (Shim 2013). Parents don't necessarily need to have the abilities or educational qualifications to teach a child specific curricula, but simply knowing that their parents value their education, that they care about their day-to-day at the school, is enough to spur motivation and improvement in students' academics.

Researchers have also show that parental involvement within the ELL setting has a positive effect on second language learning, student motivation and academic achievement as a whole (Shim, 2013). The research concluded that three major obstacles affected how parent involvement was working in an ELL setting: teacher judgments toward ELL students and their parents, ELL parents' frustration about their inability to influence a teacher's decision making, and ELL parents' fear of repercussions for speaking up. These components are directly correlated with the cultural norms and differences when working with families unfamiliar with the American educational system. Parents' uncertainty then must not be seen as a push back

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against education, but instead a result of our lack of positive education to help them understand what is happening in schools.

Change in Student Population

As noted at the beginning of the literature review, the depth of research in this area sometimes falls short. We've come to a point where our schools are becoming more diverse every year, yet we are not equipped to address this. According to the 2010 U. S. Census, approximately 36.3 % of the population of students belonged to a racial or ethnic minority group (Malone, 2015). English language learners continue to increase rapidly. The percentage of public school students in the United States who were ELL was higher in 2012-2013 (estimated 4.4 million students) than in 2002-03 (estimated 4.1 million students) (The Condition of Education, 2015).

Although the face of our student/family population is continuing to change, much of education and our educators remain the same. Malone (2015) explored this very point noting that while the U.S. public schools have become more culturally diverse with students immigrating to the United States, in many instances the educational field has remained homogeneous. If we are to effectively address this change in student population, we need to respect and explore the evolving face of our student populations, while actively engaging new educators and families to foster growth.

Teacher Training

If we expect our teachers to lead by example and work towards establishing positive relationships with families, then the proper training and ongoing support must exist. Current teacher education programs around the country are not engaging future teachers with the tools

necessary to work with families whose culture is different from their own. Without effective training, educators may not be able to recognize and encourage forms of parent involvement (Malone 2015). Teacher education programs can proactively address these challenges by modifying course offerings to include minority parent involvement and ELL methods.The concept of collaboration means that all individuals involved must be equipped with the necessary knowledge and tools to improve their ability to form these relationships. "Because culture determines an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and actions, some families may find it challenging to participate in their children's school because of cultural influence" (Malone, p. 15, 2015). While we need to continue focus on how we effectively help families that are experiencing schools in the US for the first time, we cannot overlook the importance of providing education to our teachers.

With teacher education, we have an opportunity to address and dispel possible negative stereotypes that are perpetuated when we lack knowledge and understanding of cultural differences.. Quezada (2014) best describes this when talking about her pre-service teachers; "In my years teaching multi-cultural foundations courses at various institutions of higher education, as well as from faculty colleagues, I commonly hear comments made by pre-service teachers in teacher education classrooms as well as by teachers in professional certification programs who are not familiar with the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students and families, to the effect 'that those parents, they just don't care'" (Quezada p.2, 2014). This is a devastating perspective that inhibits parent involvement and makes positive family-teacher relationships impossible.

Educators have grown in their acknowledgement that all students are not the same and that different students respond to different teaching techniques. There is now a need to expand that understanding to parents. We cannot address parents thinking that parents are the same, with the same needs, and that we can communicate with them all in the same ways. The lack of involvement of immigrant and refugee parents is often misinterpreted by teachers or schools as a deficit in the parents' value system rather than the socioeconomic and/or cultural barriers parents may face (Georgis et al., 2014). If we educate our teachers to understand the unique cultural dynamics in play when dealing with ethnically diverse parents, we can avoid these misinterpretations. Our families are changing, and we need to identify what barriers exist, address those barriers, and establish a sense of clarity for all those included in forming positive learning communities.

Barriers for ELL Families

As educators, understanding the challenges ELL parents may face is critical to fostering parental involvement in our ELL students' school experiences and supporting academic success. (Pangerov, 2010). The current research is somewhat limited when it comes to ELL engagement. Pangerov (2010) explored the views of two specific ELL families as they progressed through this new educational system. Both families had migrated to America, one coming from Russia and the other from Somalia. One significant and immediate challenge noted is how expectations for how teachers and schools are "supposed" to act, based on one's home country schooling experience, influences ELL parents' experiences with U. S. schools (Pangerov, 2010). This is just one component, but it is something that occurs before the teacher and parent/student have even had an encounter. "As educators, we expect parental involvement with the schooling of

their children to be important to students' success; however, we often know little or nothing about who the parents are and the realities of their own education" (Pangerov p. 107, 2010). Without an understanding of what some parent's, depending on their culture, expectations are, we cannot effectively plan to address them.

Studying acquisition of literacy, Pangerov (2010) highlights needs in three main areas: access to books and/or technology, structured study time, and regular reading and writing exposure. These opportunities vary greatly depending on the families' experiences and resources. While some ELL families have parents that are educated and have ample educational resources available (books, computers, tutor help), other families may have no formal education and limited resources. It is important that we not assume or generalize one of these identities to all of our ELL families.

While there is diversity within the ELL population Pangerov (2010) explains one of the distinctive characteristics many of them share is that children often quickly surpass their parents' proficiency in the new language. We need to explore parental proficiency in the new language in order to effectively communicate with these parents. Education is becoming more diverse and more complex, with fewer of our students fitting into traditional monolingual monocultural school molds (Pangerov, 2010).

While there are barriers that apply to all families, we must acknowledge that ELL families deal with a unique spectrum of challenges. The barriers are frequently beyond the control of parents and may be directly influenced by personal traits and characteristics. (Yoder & Lopez, 2013) The language barrier is the most commonly noted barrier, but other cultural barriers may be applicable as well. Georgis et al. (2014) identified different cultural barriers

when researching Somali refugee families. "Some parents were confused with the host school's flexible and student-centered approach to instruction and classroom discipline; whereas other parents embraced the difference and commented positively on the school" (Georgis et al., 2014). Unfamiliarity of our school system in America presents key challenges for these families.

Georgis (2014) continued to note that, parents were unfamiliar with the ELL policies of the school and felt that the school was treating their children differently. Something as simple as explaining the policies and the positive impacts they can have on their child could help dispel parent fears that their child's treatment is something negative. The lack of understanding creates a tension and mistrust that cripples forming positive relationships. Basic understanding of various cultures is at the heart of working appropriately and communicating with these families.

With different cultures, comes a wide range of unique characteristics that can all have an affect on a student's education. Cultural differences vary from more subtle cultural norms such as differences in accepted distance for personal space to more complex issues such as perceptions of authority figures or outlook on what is considered sharing behavior (Larocque et al., 2011). All of these components are unique and vary greatly depending on the type of family.

In addition to overarching ideological and cultural barriers there more still more practical barriers found especially with refugee families. Their basic needs, such as transportation, lack of resources, and odd hours for minimal paying jobs, greatly affect the day-to-day functioning of students and their families. We must accept that not all parents can be involved in the same way. One way to move the parent engagement dialogue forward is to acknowledge the needs of parents and allow their daily realities and experiences to define the nature of their school engagement.

In summary, we must acknowledge that the research describes a number of barriers limiting the success of our ELL families. The barriers most often are lack of English language proficiency, parent education level, disconnect between school culture and home culture, and other logistical issues. Educators have a difficult but mandatory responsibility to address these issues to the best of their abilities.

Strategies for Improvement

I have spent significant time exploring the barriers facing ELL families and now it is vitally important to address how schools can best take steps to eliminate them, thereby increasing participation from all families and helping student achievement. For clarification, I've separated the barriers in three categories: emotional/cultural barriers, language barriers, and physical barriers.

Emotional/cultural barriers may be one of the hardest to improve, yet most important. These barriers exist for many reasons. The parents themselves may not have experienced success in schools, therefore lingering mistrust in the system may be present. Clarity is vital when trying to collaborate with others. Teachers need to extend themselves to offer a variety of options for parents to participate, with these options, clear job descriptions for each task can go a long way to alleviating the fear of not knowing what to do (Larocque et al., 2011). Student and parent expectations are also a known component within our schools, yet teachers need to do a better job of letting parents share their expectations of the teacher. Finally, teachers can use culture and students' experiences as a launch pad for new learning. "When the teacher is culturally aware, the conflict between systems is minimized, and there is a formulation of strategies to work

around differences" (Larocque et al., p. 120, 2011). Differences will always exist, but the idea of learning to work with each other and have positive collaboration is key to student achievement.

The language barrier is the most obvious that occurs between individuals of different cultures. However, there are multiple levels to this. First, there may be the language barrier where no understanding occurs between two. When this occurs in our schools, teachers need to work effectively to help minimize this problem. Using a variety of translated material is important (newsletters, pictures, videos), as well as providing interpreters whenever communicating with families. One crucial step in translation however, is being respectful of possible family dynamics. "Teachers and schools should avoid the pitfall of using children as interpreters for their parents; this practice upsets the balance and authority in the parent-child relationship" (Larocque et al., p. 119, 2011). Finally, there may be instances where families have limited English understanding. This can be misunderstood by the schools. Many times, families may appear very literate in English, but struggle with academic language. The language can appear so academic, scientific, or abstract that it can be experienced as impersonal (Larocque et al., 2011). Although the language barrier may seem to be easy to solve, the number of aspects surrounding make it difficult.

Refugee families experience a number of traumatic events as they transition to a new environment. Lack of resources typically account for a hard daily life. Transportation is a very important component to having parents involved in our schools. The difficulty of getting to school is a daily barrier facing many refugee families. If teachers provide a variety of meeting times, there is a greater likelihood that parents will find a time that suits their schedules. Also, the possibility of childcare or alternate locations may be effective in achieving a face-to-face

meeting. "For school based activities, school buses can be used to pick up parents before meetings and return them to bus stops near their home" (Larocque et al., p. 119, 2011). Strategies can be used to breakdown these barriers, but it's up to our schools to follow through.

Rise of Somali Population

The Twin Cities has become saturated with a large population of Somali individuals in the past decade. The Somali, foreign born population has jumped from 9,900 in 2000 to 21,000 in 2012. (MN Compass, 2015) It's important to study this population, to know how we can serve them in their children's education.

Language Proficiency

The Twin Cities remains one of the destinations for Somali refugees; therefore, it is important to understand the linguistic abilities of these individuals. In the early 2000's the Wilder Research Center conducted a multilingual telephone interview with adults from specific immigrant groups, including the Somali community. The interviewers screened more than 12,000 selected households and identified 4, 415 immigrants (Fennelly & Palasz, 2003). The majority entered the United State as refugees or were reunited with family members who had fled civil war or persecution. The findings from the Wilder study shed light on the range of abilities that members of the Somali community have. The data can not account for all individuals, yet trends are important.

Of the four largest immigrant populations in Minnesota, Russians, Somalis, Mexicans, and Hmong-the odds of speaking good English were highest for Somalis (Fennelly & Palasz 2003). The results stressed English was spoken at home more frequently in Somali homes than others. Even though Somalis are the most recent arrivals, they had the highest levels of

proficiency on all measures of English ability in the analysis (Fennelly & Palasz, 2003). A large majority of Somali individuals that participated in this study indicated they had spent time in refugee camps. This was mentioned as a possibility for explaining the strong English skills of some Somalis, since their significant periods of time in these camps predominantly occurred in English-speaking Kenya (Fennelly & Palasz, 2003).

These findings also shed light on a discrepancy that can be found in the ELL research. One could argue that the high English proficiency diminishes the argument that language is one of the largest concerns with parent involvement in an ELL setting. We must remember that this was one study done in 2003 and the number of Somali refugees has continued to climb at a high rate in the Twin Cities. We cannot generalize the English proficiency rate in this study to all Somali refugees. I also believe the issue is the amount of research being done on specific immigrant populations. For example, another side to the relocation of the Somali population is the trauma that a large number of families have experienced. We've heard the positive that may come from specific refugee camps; however, one must not expect that from the entire population.

Chapter 3

Methods

Hamline University promotes four components of education: developing educators and leaders who (1) promote equity in schools and society, (2) building communities of teachers and learners, and (3) constructing knowledge and (4) practice through inquiry and reflection. I'm going to be examining and developing criteria in order to build better communities of teachers, parents and learners within my school. This community within the school setting will incorporate a better collaborative relationship among teachers and ELL parents. This collaborative awareness, aims to promote achievement and increased learning for all learners.

While highlighting the overall importance of parental involvement, narrowing in on the ELL school setting is a main priority for this study. Unless educators deal with a variety of cultural barriers, students' belief in education and academic achievement can be damaged. Actions must be taken in order to create a more welcoming and collaborative environment for ELL parents within the school setting. Highlighting what parents have to offer, while supporting them in their needs, will gradually increase the participation needed by all families in each classroom.

Parent involvement is an essential component when creating the most positive learning experience for our students. Positive and comprehensive research is being done on this topic;

however, there is a lack of evidence on how to help unique populations such as ELL's. My goal

for this capstone is to investigate this topic in depth. I want to get a clearer picture of what

positive aspects exist right now, but also what uncommon or unique barriers exist for these

families. Also, throughout the process of researching this topic I've found it interesting that most

recommendations for improving parent involvement comes from "experts".

I want to create a different path for us to learn about parent involvement in the ELL

setting, which is to learn from those parents that have lived/are living the experience. My hope is

that through exploring more in depth these components around parent involvement in the ELL

setting, and listening to dialogue from those who have experienced it, a better line of

communication will be open among teacher, parent, and student.

Qualitative Study

The characteristics of qualitative study fit my study for a number of reasons. First, the

topic is "immature", due to a lack of theory and previous research (Creswell, p. 98, 2009).

Specifically, the ELL community is continuously growing, yet our level of education of how to

effectively work with these families is limited. Also, this study is aligned with social problems in

today's society. Sometimes the study may be organized around identifying the social, political, or

historical context of the problem under study (Cresswell, p.176, 2009). These experiences are the

reasons why more research must be done specifically with the ELL community in order to help

all individuals involved.

In a qualitative study, researchers collect data themselves through examining documents,

observing behavior, or interviewing participants. (Creswell, p.175, 2009). With a sense of

freedom using a qualitative approach, I will be able to interview specific individuals, collect data

using questionnaires, and also listen to dialogue from a group forum.

Twenty K-8 classroom teachers will complete questionnaires based on their own views of

parent involvement. The teacher questionnaire can be found in Appendix II. Questions will

allow teachers to share personal views of the families they currently work with. Digging more

into the questionnaires, I will work on exploring patterns and/or categories in which most

answers fall. Face-to-face interviews will also be completed with three different individuals: our

Somali parent liaison, a newcomer father, and a mother that has had students in the School A

system for five years.

The most anticipated step, for me, in the process of collecting data will be using a group

forum. Listening to the group forum consisting of newcomer families and those families that

have been part of US schools for some time will hopefully provide a great amount of discussion

and information. This kind of research promotes a sense of ownership among those involved.

The interplay between participants not only stimulates thinking among them, but also provides a

community approach, which has shown to be empowering among oppressed groups (Yoder &

Lopez, 2013). The information and advice being shared, will help paint a picture of what could

possibly help create strategies for the future. I will keep a detailed journal of interviews, group

forum, and most importantly, continued reflections throughout the study.

School Setting

The present study occurs in an K-8 urban charter school in Minneapolis, MN. The school

population is approximately 375 students for the 2014-15 academic year and has a demographic

breakdown of 95% ELL population and 97% Free/Reduced priced lunch. The school staff is

comprised of 46 individuals, with 10 identified as Somali.

Participants

The participants for this study are both teachers and parents. Twenty teachers ranging

from grades K-8 will complete the Teacher Questionnaire. Of the twenty teachers, 95% are

Caucasian and 5% are Somali. The teachers overall instruction experience is rather new, with

70% of the teachers having taught for less than five years.

Three individuals will be used for personal interviews. The first participant is currently

the School A parent liaison. He has been with our school for three years. For security, I will use

the name Ahmed. Ahmed is a Somali immigrant who came to the US in 2001. He completed his

early life education in Somalia and has completed an associate's degree since arriving in the US. Ahmed has three children that attend an elementary school in a different school district.

The other two with whom I conducted interviews are parents with student currently enrolled at School A. The major difference between the two parents is that one is a newcomer and the other is not. The first is a father who immigrated to the US in the past year from Somalia. He has two sons enrolled in School A, but has had no formal education himself. This interview will be conducted with the help of a translator, since English is not his first language. The second parent interview will be with a mother who has had four children attend School A over the past five years. She attended school in Somalia and completed her education through high school before moving to America.

Finally, the parent discussion forum consisted of 10 parents (4 males and 6 females) representing a total of 30 students. These parents range in age from 35-60. Four of the parents have children that have been a part of school A for a number of years. The remaining 6 parents are part of our newcomer program. These parents recently immigrated to the Twin Cities.

Data Collection & Analysis

I collected and organized responses from teachers based on their personal beliefs about parent involvement in our school setting. I also kept a detailed journal of the responses from parents both in our interviews and parent forum. The parent interviews were based on specific

questions that had been developed ahead of time (this document is attached). Given that I was

uncertain of the educational level or language proficiency of the interviewees, I felt it was best to

conduct the interviews so that participants could verbally respond, rather than requiring them to

articulate responses in writing.

The parent forum was more of an open-ended discussion without the specificity in prompts that

were given in the interviews. To begin the discussion I highlighted the purpose for having the

forum and some possible discussion points. My discussion points were as followed:

1. Importance of school attendance

2. Importance of staying at one school

3. Importance of asking questions about resources

Parents were not limited to only these topics, but points were introduced to steer conversation to

areas of interest in this study. Teacher and parent names were not used to conduct this study.

Race and education level were identified by parents to help in data collection and analysis, but

parents were not screened based on this information.

<u>Limitations</u>

Educators must continuously reflect on their struggles and achievements to better

themselves for the future. In regards to this study I have worked to remain mindful of the

limitations of method and results. While I know that certain limitations may have arisen, in

hopes to successfully run this study, I also included how I tried to resolve these limitations. First

I was aware that I might have a difficult time scheduling interviews with parents. Along with this struggle, I feared that my role as an administrator, as well as my relationships with some of the parents and teachers might affect the answering of questions. In an effort to minimize these effects I worked closely with our parent liaison and made sure teachers knew their responses were anonymous.

It took much longer than anticipated to coordinate having parents involved in this study. When speaking with our parent liaison, it became apparent that we would need to provide transportation and that it would be best for parents if these discussions were held at the school. We planned for and held two parent forums. The first parent forum didn't have the attendance we were hoping for, due to a lack of transportation. To address this problem for the second parent forum, we offered transportation to the school for parents, and we made sure childcare was available.

Within the Somali community, males hold a kind of entitlement over women which could be another limitation. I was worried that discussion might be dominated by males in our parent forum, due to this sense of entitlement and power. In an effort to mitigate this effect, I arranged to have more females as part of the parent forum. Also, our experienced families made an effort to ensure all newcomer parents had a chance to speak.

Time continues to be difficult for many involved in this study. Teachers and parents both cherish time they have with their families. To be called upon for parent nights at school or volunteer opportunities within the classroom might be difficult. Parents' educational level may affect their ability to answer the questionnaire. Having parents with no reading ability or English speaking skills might increase the likelihood of miscommunication during translation. Every

effort was made to work with participants' schedules; translators were also present in the meetings to help participants better understand the context and meaning of statements, to minimize mistranslation of a written transcript, and to offer clarification of questions during interviews to ensure understanding.

Conclusion

Results from the study will be shared in chapter four.

Chapter 4

Results

<u>Introduction</u>

The data that was collected throughout this study included responses from teachers and

parents. The responses were gathered by completing questionnaires, interviews, and finally a

parent discussion forum. Throughout this process, I also had Ahmed our parent liaison, do

translating. Teacher responses were conducted solely through the questionnaire which was

handed out to them. This type of process was done in order to eliminate any hesitation to answer

truthfully. However, the parents responses to questions came specifically through interviews and

the parent discussion forum. Due to educational background of some, I believed it would be an

easier process for the parents to respond orally and not be required to translate their beliefs and

answers into writing. The parent discussion was also an opportunity to use a less structured

format, specifically so families had the opportunity to ask and respond as they preferred. While

reflecting on the topics, certain responses from both teachers and parents struck me and have

been highlighted. Also, certain themes after reflecting on the responses. To begin I will expand

on some highlights from the responses to the teacher survey, which you can review in Appendix

II.

<u>Teacher Questionnaire</u>

Teachers at School A seem to have strong positive feelings when it comes to parents

valuing their students' education. A majority of responses from teachers expressed an

understanding that parents are supportive of teachers and students and do what they can to ask

questions to better understand the importance of their child's education. As one teacher stated,

"As a whole, the parents express a large amount of respect for teachers. Students' parents seem to value education to a high degree. Most of them are very supportive in advocating for their child's learning". Even though there may be a discrepancy in knowledge or education among parents and teachers, the effort of parents seems to be strong. "Parents are always asking for updates on their child's behavior and progress. They are always thanking the child's teacher. They try to help out as much as they can" (Teacher). Motivation from the parent in a child's education is crucial, and from these responses it seems to be clear that a significant number of families want to know how to best support their child.

Questioning/reflection is an important aspect when it comes to developing the strong relationships that are needed in a positive, collaborative community. When teachers were asked whether or not they believed their views on education differ from those of the students' parents, explicit differences were shown. The education system in America is much different from schools in Somalia. Teachers expressed how they expected that this difference created a sense of misunderstanding. "Traditional Somali teachers do things differently than what we do here, and parents cannot expect the same" (Teacher).

The different styles of the two education systems can be seen especially when teachers discussed the topic of homework and involvement outside of school. A common answer from teachers expressed the importance of continued education beyond the school day. Students should expect to work outside of the school day. This belief taps into the ongoing debate in American education regarding the effect and role of homework. Many of the teachers explained how homework doesn't necessarily correlate with achievement. One teacher remarked they felt parents "seem to believe in the quantity of homework over the quality of it." These differing

views are important to note as we continue to strive towards a stronger collaborative environment.

Communication has been noted throughout this capstone as an aspect that can be a major barrier when it comes to parent involvement. I asked teachers how they communicate with their students' parents. One teacher responded, "I use whatever means is most comfortable and convenient for them. This includes meetings in person, texting and phone calls." The majority of teachers seemed to highlight that multiple ways of communicating is the best path to a successful partnership. However, teachers did note the necessity of translation. One teacher responded that they communicate "through phone calls/texts, email, and face to face meetings. However, translators are usually needed which can be difficult to arrange." The teachers seem to understand the importance of communication; however, as you can see, when it comes to this communication barriers do exist.

It is important to note the struggles some staff members described when it comes to communication. Time and language barriers seem to dominate the responses. Teachers expressed the frustration of having to use translators. One issue was just finding personnel to actually do the translation. More importantly, one teacher expressed how impersonal these discussions can be when speaking through a translator; "I am able to communicate through translators; however, it feels like the message is lost in translation". This is such an important point, especially given its possible effects on students' learning. The miscommunication that can occur when trying to discuss a student's performance or behavior can have drastic effects on how that child responds to the communication.

Currently, School A holds two parent nights throughout the school year. These parent nights are to fulfill the requirement for a Title 1 school. Teachers were asked to express their feelings towards these nights and any other important suggestions about how to improve parent-teacher communication and parent involvement. Building community was a strong theme that continued to be expressed throughout these two remaining questions. The positive interactions that occurred during these nights highlighted the possibility that these could be held more frequently throughout the school year.

Teachers expressed how these nights were great for building community and drawing attention to the positive interactions that can exist. One teacher noted how "parents make an effort to come and participate no matter their ability or academic level. It's a great chance to get families together to do reading and math activities with their students". Teachers seem to understand the importance of having these families involved. Teachers noted that in the future, more opportunities similar to these events need to take place.

To address the obvious barriers of language and education, teachers gave a few suggestions. Professional translators was an important element that a large number of teachers noted. With so many discussions needing the assistance of a translator, teachers believed having set employees that were used for this job would help eliminate part of the frustration. Currently students and staff members who are present are often used for translations. This can cause embarrassment for the parents (if the student is in trouble) and teachers worry that the message is not always being presented accurately, especially when the student is translating.

Also, with the discrepancy in educational background, some teachers highlighted the possibility of more education classes for parents. One recommended "having monthly meetings

for parents to come in and conference/ask questions about learning/academics." From the responses, we can gain a better appreciation for how teachers at School A feel about the parents in the community and their involvement in the school. Teacher responses again highlighted the importance of parent involvement and the gaps that exist in ideas and follow through and how to improve them. The teachers dedication to improving parent involvement is a crucial first step. Now there needs to be a continued effort to bridge the missing links to create the most positive collaboration for all.

Interviews

My first interview was with our school's parent liaison, Ahmed. Ahmed started out at School A as the Arabic instructor. After three years in that role, the position of parent liaison opened and with his experience in the classroom and his strong connection with the local Somali community, he was an excellent choice. He had hoped his role would allow him to help families in the Somali community find a quality school, such as School A. As noted previously Ahmed did most of his schooling in Somalia, but has completed an Associate's degree since coming to the Twin Cities.

Our discussion began with talking about his children and how he supports their education. He made a point to explain that the school his children attend sends out weekly emails which he would like see happen at School A. Also, John expressed the importance of parents' stopping in to meet face-to-face, other than just attending conferences. Ahmed discussed how in Somalia, men commonly didn't help or weren't active in their child's day-to-day activities related to education. The role of the man was to work and make money for the family. He explained his learning curve when coming to America, "When I was in Somalia, I worked and

the mom would take care of the kids. I've now come to understand one parent can't just raise the kids. I need to be active in their learning." Ahmed realizes the importance of parent involvement in his children's education. He understood and mentioned how learning doesn't just stop at school in America. Kids now have to improve their abilities outside of school.

The second part of the interview with Ahmed was to discuss the realities he saw in School A. "Teachers assume that all families are similar in terms of ability to function and communicate. Teachers also need to try and communicate to all families on their own, through multiple ways." He spoke strongly of teachers needing to take the time to understand the specifics surrounding their students' parents. Also, he explained how School A could do a better job and work towards providing resources such as books and possibly computers to the Somali community. Finally, we discussed the behavior problems that occur at School A. Schools in Somalia eliminate behaviors through punishment and fear, contrary to the more dialogue-based intervention between teacher and student that occurs in America. Ahmed stated how we must work with families to help them understand that children will and must continue to work through problems by conversing with others.

The second interview that took place was with a newcomer parent who immigrated to America in the past year. All of his schooling was completed in Africa where his highest education was graduating high school. Our interview focused on School A and his experiences thus far in our education system. When asked about how he knew whether his kids were doing well in school, he explained how on the first day of school the teacher had instructed him to check his child's backpack for updates. A barrier to his experience with School A were frustrations that public transit was his only possible way of getting to school.

Communication was a major point of emphasis when discussing elements related to this father's experiences. The father explained how he wished teachers would send frequent emails. The father said through translation, "Even if someone can't speak English, someone in the family can usually read the email." The most interesting comment from this interview happened when speaking about teachers' understandings of families. The father said, "I am a newcomer to America, but yet I understand English. Teachers must attempt to learn more about the families." This highlights once again the point of teachers taking the time to learn more about our families and the varying ways to communicate effectively with them.

A lack of educational resources was also another concern for this father. He expressed how he noticed kids' need to continue learning outside of school, but was unclear of the resources he could use. The father admitted that early on he was confused about the library system in the US. He believed that you had to pay in order to go in the library. The father knew that he must do his best to help his children succeed, even though his ability to help them with actual school work was limited.

A mother of four students who had been a part of School A for five years was my last interview. She also had completed her education through high school. When asked about how she knows whether her kids are successful, she gave more of an academic answer. The mother explained how she knows to look at test data and report cards. She understood that test scores were important in the US schools. The mother explained how she learned the importance of ongoing education outside of school. She sets time aside nightly for homework before children can use any technology at home. She also stressed how she has her children work with tutors twice a week.

As far as communication, she expressed how she acknowledges that transportation can be difficult for many of the families, yet it isn't difficult for her. "The face-to-face conversations are very important, and that's why I stop by school other than conferences." Another concern that was explained was the difficulty in getting resources for some families. Finally, she didn't have any school to compare to, since School A was the only school she's ever been a part of.

Parent Discussion Forum

The parent discussion meeting was held during the school day at School A. This discussion was a meeting between senior parents from this school and newcomer parents. The focus of this gathering was to increase the parents' school involvement. Parents exchanged suggestions and experiences with everyone. I began the meeting by sharing some critical points that I deemed important for new families. I shared how school attendance is important, the ability to help with resources if needed, and the importance of staying with one school over a number of years. Once I completed my part of the discussion, each experienced parent had a chance to speak to the newcomers. The experienced parents took a strong leadership role in this part of the parent forum, each providing specific ideas and experiences that have shaped how their children achieve in today's schools. The following is a description of topics the parents shared.

The senior parents displayed a lot of good suggestions from past experience:

- The importance of being involved at school

- Resources, specifically online programs and tutoring programs around the area

- Taking the time to talk with kids about the day and checking their backpacks daily

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- Creating an environment to do their homework

- The importance of healthy living, including sleep

- The dangers of TV and Social Media

- Daycare kids spend way too much time at daycare (usually until 8-9 PM) and a large number of these facilities are very unstructured

The newcomer parents felt very appreciated and took the time to share their thoughts:

- Would like more language support, possibly language classes or better translation

- Transportation support

- Lack of materials.Strong need for books for their home environment

- Internet Access.Would like to learn more about getting computers or how kids can use computers at libraries

Chapter 5

When I look over my research and compare it to what experts have advised about parent involvement, I have noticed the following: a lack of dialogue between newcomer families and the "experts" in education, missing specific learning opportunities based on family experiences of being in a new educational environment, and finally the leadership that experienced families show while supporting newcomer families.

Literature Review

First, the education community needs to do a better job recognizing that our student demographics are constantly changing. Only after taking the time to understand the families educators work with, can positive collaboration occur. Parent involvement has major effects on children, inside and outside of the classroom. The positive effects related to our students' success are crucial in supporting their futures. This area in our educational system is one that frequently falls short, yet can be improved with basic steps.

Training for educators must take into account how to better serve and relate to the families in our schools. Also, teachers must take on the responsibility of educating themselves. All students can't be helped in the same manner, and we must extend this thought to our parents as well. "If future teachers are to involve parents in meaningful ways, they must come to understand how the perceptions and practice of parent involvement are mediated by both the reality of parents' lives and the constraints of particular school contexts"(Christianakis, 2011).

Throughout this study, the literature review has served as a guide for the current status of parent involvement in education, and possible ways of improving this collaboration. Giving individuals a voice can help create a positive atmosphere where collaboration exists. The hope is

by understanding each other better and working together towards a common goal, our students will be better fit for the future.

<u>Implications</u>

This capstone not only has implications for how I myself as an educator will move forward, but also for the direction of School A. The parent discussion turned into an unexpected success that gave voice and meaning to a lot of families. Having the families share their experience and speak as experts concerning the school environment in the US helped establish the sense of a strong community that will hopefully continue. The biggest surprise that came from this study was the leadership role our experienced parents placed on themselves. Without being instructed to do so, each parent had outlined specific statements/stories they wanted to share in order to start the discussion. One parent used the story of Thomas Edison as a way to encourage the parents that even though some may not understand the abilities of your children right now, the constant support by them can have extreme benefits. Another parent raised a large concern for the type of environment these children experience in their daily life. Specifically speaking to the unstructured daycare that many students go to immediately after school and stay until around 9PM. The dedication that theses parents had helped highlight even more the amount of care they have for their children as well as others in the community.

At Hamline University, we are urged to be reflective educators. The idea of this study came from that constant reflection of how we could better serve our students at school A. This capstone provides insights into the possibilities that can happen with our families. The reactions received following the parent forum showed a strong commitment to helping each other. Parents specifically asked if we could have more meetings such as this. At the same time, they requested

to start including more families and teachers. Our staff at School A was especially interested in the study as well. I presented the material/findings at an all staff meeting and explained the hope for the future. Teachers were very open about the positive reactions they had toward this type of study. They wanted to know how they could be involved even more. School A now can continue to improve parent involvement through important dialogue among teachers and families.

Limitations

While addressing the future and the hope of continuing this type of parent outreach, limitations must be addressed. Resources continued to be highlighted throughout research and actual data collected during interviews/parent forum discussions. This limitation is one that can be improved upon, but never solved. It will continue to be difficult providing ample numbers of books and computers to our families. Steps can be taken in order to help serve as many families as possible, but it is unrealistic to imagine that we could provide for all. With building such a strong connection between teachers and students, the effect of teacher turnover could prove to be a difficulty. School A has struggled in the past with keeping staff members for consecutive years. The hope would be that with a stronger relationship among teachers and parents, teachers would have more reason to stay and provide the stability that is needed for a quality school environment. Finally, time has and will always be an issue. All parties involved lead busy lives and the time that is necessary for quality meetings can sometimes be daunting. The hope is with the positive results that are shown from these meetings, both teachers and parents take the time to be committed.

Conclusion

What is missing in education? Too often the answer to this questions is - Parents. Researchers continue to explore how we can increase student achievement. Teaching styles and multiple curriculums seem to be the focus of research, and improvement programs to increase student achievement. Yet we see little research being done to explore how parent involvement could help. We continue to focus on the teacher-student relationship, while in essence ignoring the critical teacher-parent and student-parent roles and dynamics that greatly influence student achievement. Our educators in America need to relate and communicate with the frequently changing student/family population. A stronger sense of community within a school environment will help affect that student achievement.

Of all my work at Hamline University, this capstone has influenced me the most. The research that was done gave me an understanding of where parent involvement stands today in education. The actual study and work that I did helped show a glimpse of hope that a strong sense of community that can be achieved, even in an ELL environment. This type of study not only helped me grow further in my education, but also had the most parental impact for the students I continue to work with everyday. Learning from experience ended up being the most influential part of this study. The experts in this capstone are those families that have overcome the transition to a new system of education. I've now also learned from this experience and hope to continue to affect those that I work with.

APPENDIX I

Parent Interviews

1. What level of education have you completed?

2. How can you tell if your child is doing well in school?

3. How do you communicate with your child's teacher?

4. What are the difficulties you have when talking to your child's teacher?

5. How do you help your child with school work at home?

6. Do you find it difficult to come to your child's school?

7. What limitations do you see in your child's school?

8. How does this school differ from previous schools you've encountered (if applicable)?

APPENDIX II

Teacher Questionnaire

1. What evidence do you have that your students' parents value their education?

2. How do your own beliefs about education differ from those of your students' parents?

3. How do you communicate with your students' parents?

4. What are common issues that hinder communication between yourself and the parent?

5. Do you think that Title 1 parent nights are beneficial as they are currently run?

6. What school wide changes would you make to create better parent-teacher collaboration?

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