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Exploring Attitudes toward Teacher Led Parent Advocacy Models that Address Racial Education Inequity

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EXPLORING ATTITUDES TOWARD TEACHER LED PARENT ADVOCACY

MODELS THAT ADDRESS RACIAL EDUCATION INEQUITY

by

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With love to my husband Alan and our son Aidan. Aidan, thanks for your patience whenever I could not take you to the park because I was "doing my homework." Thanks for your love, understanding, and support. You worked on this project as much as I did. You are my inspiration.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Problem

The state of public education in the United States is overwhelmingly flawed and despite several government attempts to reform education, the racial and income inequity gap continues to expand. This is painstakingly true in the education field for Hispanic and African American students (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Minnesota, for instance, presents an alarming case. According to the American College Testing (ACT), 61% of white students met college readiness standards whereas only 16% of Black students did (2013). Notwithstanding high rates of overall secondary school completion in Minnesota, high school graduation rates for Hispanic and Native American students rank at the bottom in the country, whereas graduation rates for African American students rank 49th in the nation (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). This contradiction is worth studying, but it is more important to try to find a solution to this problem. Some authors suggest that the racial education gap exists because of cultural differences in regards to parenting practices and school involvement (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Ripley, 2013). Other authors argue that the education achievement gap results from infrastructure and systemic inequities (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Instead of choosing one of these two sides, as an

educator, I feel empowered to do my best to address both issues; improving practices to involve parents, and addressing systemic inequities in our society. To this end, I present the following question: *What are teachers and parents' attitudes toward a teacher led parent advocacy model that addresses education inequity in Minnesota?*

In this chapter, I present my journey towards my research topic and how my research interest developed. I also introduce the context and the rationale to conduct this project as well as my definition of key terms that are specific to the development of this research topic.

My Personal Journey

I was born in the Dominican Republic and I migrated to the United States in 2003 with the dream to pursue higher education. This dream was unattainable back home because political unrest made our public university dangerous and the private colleges were unaffordable. Once in New York, I enrolled at Hostos Community College, one of the institutions from the City University of New York. The transition was difficult; I struggled with academic English and as an international student I was not eligible to receive financial aid. The paths to higher education in the United States are considerably different than they are in the Dominican Republic as well. In my home country, liberal arts degrees do not exist beyond a degree in humanities and I often struggled to choose the appropriate courses during registration. At Hostos, despite these challenges, I was outperforming my peers who had been educated within the public school system in New York City. My peers were struggling in writing, reading comprehension, and math, and most of them had been through remedial classes before they could enroll in courses from

the programs they had chosen. I quickly learned that their school system was failing them, and that the high school dropout rate in The Bronx was increasingly high. My college peers in the South Bronx seemed to know as little as I knew about the education system in the United States; and I hypothesize that if my peers' parents had received support and information about education standards and resources, my peers would have been better prepared academically upon entering college.

One of my professors at Hostos noticed my commitment to my courses, and she suggested that I should apply to the honors programs available at the college. Upon completion of my applications, I was admitted into the Hostos Scholars Program, and to the *Phi Theta Kappa* Honors Society for two-year colleges. These memberships gave me access to great advisors, opportunities for leadership, and more rigorous academic assignments. While my advisors were pushing me towards the right path, my peers continued to struggle alone. None of the friends I made in my first year at Hostos graduated with me, and I wondered about the school system that had failed them.

Struggles within Low-Income Communities

Within a year after obtaining my associate's degree, I started working as a constituent liaison for a member of the New York State Assembly. In this capacity, I worked closely with low-income parents and I witnessed their struggle to secure school placement for their children at the few well performing schools in the Lower East Side (LES) neighborhood of Manhattan. At the time, public school placement in New York City was based on one's home address, but in the Lower East Side, parents had the ability to choose a school outside their assigned geographic area. With so many failing district schools, this may look like a great advantage, but the reality was that it was not solving

the problem. The schools outside geographic zones did not offer transportation, and the schools with better outcomes had increasingly large waitlists and offered admissions through a lottery system only. This resulted in yet another example of racial and income inequity. Families living in public housing projects had no choice but to send their children to their assigned school because they could not afford alternative forms of transportation or after-school programs.

Education Inequities Hit Home

While at Hostos, my college advisor pointed me to the Harvard Extension School to continue my undergraduate studies. Upon admission, my husband and I moved to Nashua, NH where my husband and I could commute to work and school. Unfortunately, shortly after we moved, our son was diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, and the lack of special needs programming in the state prompted our move to Massachusetts less than a year later. At the time, our son's neurologist was prescribing intensive therapies and treatment for our child, but our local school district had limited resources to offer the appropriate services that our child needed. I remember the frustration I felt when I had to hand pick a town in Massachusetts with the assistance of a social worker. She helped me eliminate many neighborhoods within a map area because of the bad reputation of their public schools. The social worker told us to stay away from the big cities and to move to smaller towns where the residents paid higher property taxes. At this point, the plight of those parents I had met in New York City became my own, and I realized that having the quality of education dictated by one's zip code was not limited to specific urban areas or even specific states. The problem was deeper, and a personal cause for me was born. Our new apartment in Massachusetts was more expensive, but the services my son received

increased considerably from two hours per week to ten. When my son turned three-years old, our public school offered full-day preschool in a classroom with a 1:2 teacher-child ratio. While my son's condition improved, my friends' children in New Hampshire were left behind while their moms constantly fought the schools and their state government as State legislators often proposed cutting more education funds. I remember feeling anguish for my friends in New Hampshire who did not have the choice to uproot their lives in order to help their children get the help they needed.

Becoming An Advocate at Home

Having a child with special needs is challenging, but it was clear to me that I would have to advocate for my child so that he could have a chance to succeed in the future. My parents instilled in me the idea that higher education was not optional, and this belief carried me through times of difficulty as I worked to obtain my undergraduate degree. My parents' advice came natural to them as both of them graduated from college, but many of the children growing in poverty today cannot say the same thing about their parents. The lack of educational opportunities is a vicious cycle. While as teachers we may not be able to give parents years of academic experiences during one school year, we are able to teach our students' parents how to become advocates on behalf of their children's present and future education.

Becoming an Education Advocate through Work

My family and I moved once again during the summer in 2011 to Minnesota in order to be closer to family. As it had become a necessity for us, prior to our move, we did our research about the services that would be available to our child once he was enrolled in school. I mailed my son's health and educational history to the elementary

school in advance, and I arranged occupational, and speech therapy services with a provider in our new community. The school district decided to adopt the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that we already had, and my child was able to start school without incidents in the fall. While my child's transition to the new school district was smooth, in the following months I learned that Minnesota has very low graduation rates for students of color (ACT, 2013). As an immigrant, and as a Latina, I worry about Minnesota's higher dropout rates in Hispanic and African American communities. In 2013, I entered the teaching profession hoping to address the issue of education inequity where children's educational outcomes are dictated by their zip codes. In my experience with education policy and as a teacher, I have witnessed different players in the education system pointing fingers at one another. Teachers, governments, school districts, teacher unions, parents, and corporate education reformers alike are blaming each other, but the issue remains unresolved.

A disparity between state and local district standards has forced teachers to dedicate time to prepare their students for standardized tests that do not resemble the school curriculum (Ripley, 2013). The government seeks to eliminate educational disparities with standardized tests, and the implementation of the Common Core. Over forty states have implemented the Common Core standards, but critics think of them as a "violation of local authority," while some teacher unions argue that teachers should not be solely held accountable for teaching the new standards before they had time to adjust to them (Ripley, 2013). In the midst of the misconception that children in poverty often have parents who are not involved in their children's education (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005), others contend that traditional parent involvement models do not address the needs

of bicultural families or those with low-income (Olivos et al., 2011).

Shannon (1996) defines (as seen in Olivos et al., ed., 2011) a paradox that affects parent involvement for bicultural parents. On one side, if they are not involved, their child's teachers complain, but on the other side, when bicultural parents do get involved they may be perceived as unexpected and aggressive. In contrast, even when teachers believe that the demands of white parents are aggressive, teachers are more likely to expect the demands and tolerate them. When bicultural parents make similar demands, teachers may perceive them as irrational and are less likely to be as tolerant to them as they are to white parents.

An Information Gap

The literature in Chapter Two documents how middle-class families have access to literature that specifically address ways to actively take control of their children's educational path (Chase & Katz, 2002; Maeroff, 2012). Upon learning about the type of literature and resources available to affluent parents, the fact that students of color living in poverty are at a disadvantage becomes more concrete to me. As a teacher at an urban school with over 85% of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, I find that resources and suggestions available to middle-class and affluent parents are out of touch and even out of reach for families of low socioeconomic status. While authors Chase and Katz, 2002 and Maeroff, 2012 encourage their readers to search for the best schools and teachers, parents of low socioeconomic status are not afforded this opportunity. Families living in poverty and with low education attainment are often unaware that there are higher performing schools available to their children. Even if they know about these

schools, however, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act does not provide funds for transportation of students outside their residential district (Noguera, 2008).

Chase and Katz, and Mareoff's recommendations may never become accessible to parents of low socioeconomic status, but I also realize that it is imperative for my students' families to learn about resources that are available to them. Some efforts that seek to reduce the racial education gap across the United States are the implementation of parent academies that strive to prepare parents of color to put their children on the college completion path. As teachers, we have an incredible opportunity to reach out to all the parents of the students we serve and not just a selected few. Using this opportunity to communicate with parents year-round, I hereby explore parents and teachers' attitudes towards a unique model where teachers can lead their own parent academies throughout the school year. Such a model is different from traditional parent academies in that the parents would learn valuable information directly from teachers, and not through instructors from other organizations. I am aware of the great work that parent-school liaisons are doing in many of our schools, but to parents, their children's teachers have a personal stake at making sure that students demonstrate growth during the school year. Teachers also have more time and opportunities than liaisons to develop trusting relationships with parents, which results in parents being more open to feedback. A teacher-led parent-advocacy training model would empower parents with the advocacy skills and the knowledge to effectively lead their children out of poverty through education. This research examined how parents and teachers feel about this theory.

Chapter Summary

There is a racial and income education gap in the United States affecting a great number of Hispanic and African American students. Through personal experience, I have learned about parents living in poverty with no access to the skills they need to advocate for their children's education. Given a teacher's unique opportunities to establish relationships with parents, I believe that it is our role to level the field for these parents by empowering them with the skills and resources that affluent parents already apply. This capstone is the first step towards this journey and given the importance of parents' voices when creating programs for families, I believe that it is critical to include them in the process. This project includes parents and teachers' views on a teacher-led parent-academy model. Their responses were collected using qualitative methods. The research addresses the question: *What are teachers and parents' attitudes toward a teacher led parent advocacy model that addresses education inequity in Minnesota?*

One of the main problems is that educational opportunities revolve as a circle, and that children in families who did not have the advantage are less likely to move up and get out of this vicious circle. Providing academic education to the parents at this age would be difficult, but if we educate parents about our education system, and how to advocate for the educational rights of their children in the same manner that affluent families do, the needs of impoverished children would be better served.

There is potential in presenting the idea that teacher-led parent academies are a cost-effective way for school districts to start turning the wheel in public education. I envision a system of parent-teacher communication, and school meetings where parents

are empowered with the right tools to advocate for their children's education. As the literature review shows, data supports the need for parental involvement, but parents and teachers' voices are the most important factor when creating a program that would require an effort from them. Chapter Two explores literature that asserts that current models for parent involvement in our schools are not relevant to the cultures and communities that we serve (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Noguera, 2008; Olivos, et al., ed., 2011). Chapter Three provides an overview of the research methods used to investigate parents and teachers' attitudes towards a teacher-led model for parent training and engagement. Chapter Four publishes the results from the investigation and their relationship with the reviewed literature. Finally, Chapter Five summarizes the learning during this process and provides suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Chapter Overview

The following literature summarizes the racial education gap that disproportionately affects Hispanic and African American students in the United States public schools. The literature also examines the role of parental engagement as an attempt to reduce this gap. Given a teacher's unique opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with parents over the school year, this literature examines the question: *What are teachers and parents' attitudes toward a teacher led parent advocacy model that addresses education inequity in Minnesota?*

The literature addresses this question in two parts: a review of the income and racial education gap in the United States, and research that evaluates parent relationships with schools and teachers. Unfortunately, the literature review also reveals that existing research offering parent advocacy recommendations was not conducted with parents of low socioeconomic status in mind. The literature denounces the lack of culturally responsive practices used to date to engage parents of diverse backgrounds, and this research sought to address that need by giving parents and teachers a voice in the process.

Definition of Key Terms

In this research, the terms Hispanic and African American students are used to match the demographics at the elementary school. In this study, a Hispanic student would be anyone who has at least one parent who moved to the United States within the last generation from a Spanish speaking country in Central, South America, or the Caribbean. In the same manner, an African American student or parent would be one with at least one parent who is African American and was born in the United States. Since there are cited studies in this research that present their results using the term Black as a demographic category instead of African American, the term Black also appears in the content. In regards to measures of academic achievement, an elimination or reduction in the racial education gap would be demonstrated when students of color are able to achieve standardized test scores, and to reach a standard of living that is similar to their white counterparts.

The Racial Education Gap

The 2014 Minnesota Assessment Results from the MN Department of Education reports that while 57% of white students in 3rd and 8th grade meet or exceed testing criteria for mathematics, only 25% of Hispanics and 20% of Black students do so. In the MCA reading tests reports, 67% of white students meet or exceed expectations, but only 36% of Hispanic students and 32% of Black students meet or exceed the same knowledge expectations. According to 2013 data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as "The Nation's Report Card," Minnesota ranks 3rd from

the bottom in the White-Black achievement gap in 8th grade reading, and it ranks 4th

from the bottom when comparing the gap between white and Hispanic students of the

same age. The reports also show that the gap has remained unchanged since 1998.

Beyond state and national education statistics, evidence of the racial and income

education gap that affects these groups has also been documented in the results of The

Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test since 2000. In 2012, United

States students ranked 12th in the reading portion of the test and ranked a dismal 26th

place in math. From these numbers, affluent United States students ranked 18th place in

math whereas students of low-income scored at 27th (Ripley, 2013). The 2009 PISA

scores show that Black students scored in average 84 points below white students. This

translates to a two-year education and learning gap between the two groups. Similar gaps

exist in graduation rates, SAT scores, and income (Ripley, 2013).

The trends in results from PISA are consistent with reports from the National

Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and organization that has compiled

education statistics for the U.S. Department of Education since 1969. NAEP uses

nationally representative samples of elementary and secondary students across the United

States to measure how much students are learning in public schools. While there are low

performing white students, the NAEP results consistently demonstrate a widening gap

between the academic skills of Hispanic and Black students, and those of white and

Asian-American students (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Test scores between 1998

and 2001 reveal a four-year gap where Black students approaching the end of high school

have lower scores across the board than white students at the end of 8th grade (Darling-

Hammond, 2010). Hispanics' reading and U.S. history scores at the end of high school

are slightly higher than those of 8th graders, but their math and geography scores are still lower than students in 8th grade. The trend in NAEP test results reveals that Hispanic and Black high school graduates have 8th grade skills, and their scores are below basic. Some researchers argue that the negative test results are related to culturally biased exams, but this claim does not explain the success of Asian American students in the same tests (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

The racial inequities in education do not end in high school. While Black and Hispanic students are "about as likely" as whites to enroll in postsecondary education, the quality of the programs available to Black students may be less selective, and the college dropout rate for Hispanics and Blacks is considerably higher that the college dropout rates for whites (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003, p.33). A 1988 sample of 8th graders in the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) that followed students during 12 years shows that from the student sample who enrolled in postsecondary education, 36% of white students obtained a college degree, but less than 17% of Hispanics and Blacks accomplished the same. Many of these students had entered college feeling confident that they would be capable to do the work, but in college they were obtaining failing grades because of gaps in knowledge. Students in this situation are required to take remedial courses that are expensive and do not count towards their graduation requirements. This was demoralizing to them and many ended up dropping out from college (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Researchers examined the data from the report and they found a correlation between higher standardized test scores and higher indicators of a student's performance. Based on this correlation, Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003 suggest that

there is a link between better high school education as measured by standardized test scores and college graduation rates.

Despite concerns about standardized tests and how they interfere with genuine learning (Dodd & Konzal, 2000), studies show a relationship between higher standardized test scores and students who were able to finish their college graduation requirements. An analysis of studies about white and Black high school students in the 1970s and 1980s shows that students who scored well on the their standardized tests were successful in college. The low scores affected Black students disproportionately, but knowing that Black and white students with successful test scores performed equally well in college suggests that by eliminating the learning gap in the early years leads to success in later years (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

In Minnesota, despite high scores on average at tests like the ACT for college readiness, the PISA exam, and the NAEP tests, the State of MN ranks as one of the states with a widening racial gap in education (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). According to the ACT scores for the class of 2013, Minnesota as a whole ranks at the top in the nation, but while 66% of white students are ready for college in Minnesota, only 16% of Black students are college ready (ACT, 2013). The discrepancies in educational achievement between whites and non-whites in Minnesota are alarming, and the situation has negative consequences in the earning power of non-whites. The legacy of education inequity goes beyond income loses. It also results infrastructure inequities, increased crime, and welfare dependency (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

College dropouts, with very few exceptions, are not high earners. According to U.S. Census information in 2000, those who left school before high school completion

earn only about a third of the earnings of those who have a bachelor's degree. The same data shows that there is a racial gap in income where Hispanics and Blacks earn less than whites even when their levels of education attainment are the same. While it may be argued that racial discrimination alone may explain this issue, research shows that whites and Blacks that are truly equally educated have the same earning power. This suggests that the racial gap income is a consequence of educational disparities that affect the amount of knowledge and skills that Hispanics and Blacks actually get from their elementary and secondary education (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). The issue of racial inequity has become a revolving door, and students and their families are not the problem (Kopp & Farr, 2012). Two-thirds of Hispanic and Black students attend schools where most kids receive free or reduced-priced lunch (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

While there is the argument that the racial gap in learning is related to households with low socioeconomic status, data suggests that low-income alone is not the problem. In 2000, 66% of students from the KIPP Academy in New York City scored above grade level by New York State Standards, but only 9% of students who attended public schools in the same district achieved this level of proficiency (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). In the case of affluent and high-performing suburban schools, there is a growing list of research that point to persisting racial education gaps that cannot be explained by income disparities, (Grossman & Ancess, 2004). Researcher Edmond Gordon notes (as cited in Grossman & Ancess, 2004) that Black, Hispanic, and Native American students at diverse socioeconomic levels tend to do worse in school than their white and Asian American peers. The 1998 *Washington Post* article "*A Good-School, Bad-Grade Mystery,*" refers to the case of Shaker Heights, a Cleveland OH suburb where despite its

open enrollment policy on advanced courses, only 30% of Blacks took honors or

Advanced Placement (AP) courses while in high school. In sharp contrast, 87% of white

students enrolled in these courses. In the specific case of Shaker Heights, the writer

attributes the low honors course enrollment to teachers with low expectations for Black

students; Black students who were ridiculed by Black classmates for "acting white" if

they were seen struggling to get good grades; and parents of color with lower thresholds

for what they consider as a bad grade in comparison to the threshold set by white parents

(Fletcher, 1998).

Models for Parent-Teacher Partnerships

The benefits of parent involvement in student achievement have been extensively

documented (Epstein, et al., 2008; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Ramney & Ramney,

1999). Fostering strong relationships between parents and schools are the foundation to

empower parents to become education advocates for their children. These relationships

ought to be grounded on mutual respect and appreciation for parents and teachers' shared

role in the child's success (Giovacco-Johnson, 2009). The nature of successful parent

involvement outcomes, however, is not that clear. Knof and Swick, 2008 posit that

teachers ought to communicate with parents on a personal level through home visits,

correspondence journals, and consistent media communication. Under this model, parent-

teacher interactions happen mostly outside the school, which is challenging because of

the additional time and effort demands that such model would impose on teachers. A

solution to this challenge may be to lower student/teacher ratios or to add more

communication support in the school. On the other hand, Epstein, a known education

researcher, delineates a parental involvement model focused on keeping parents informed, but where the interactions happen mostly at school. Epstein, et al., 2008 recommends parent education to inform parents about their children's development and their children's progress in school. The model also advises parents to volunteer in school and community activities, and to partake in the decision making process that happens at parent-teacher organizations and school committees (Olivos, et al., ed., 2011). These recommendations do not come without barriers for many families, such as time constraints when parents of low-income have more than one job, language barriers within immigrant communities, and lack of knowledge about how the education system in the United States works.

While many researchers have praised the benefits of parents as classroom helpers, reading schemes, and parent-teacher conferences, researcher Carol Vincent argued that reality shows dissenting voices between parents and teachers (Vincent, 2005). The situation, according to Vincent, resembles the failures in many other professions where the theory has not met with practice. Vincent's views on current parental involvement in the classroom is either clerical in order to reduce teachers' "mundane" tasks or an opportunity for parents to appreciate the complexities of a teacher's job (2005). In both instances, Vincent suggested that parent participation in classrooms only benefits the teacher. The KIPP Academy has been very successful with its students, and their expectations for both students and their parents are clearly spelled out in home-school contracts (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). In regards to contracts of this kind, Vincent argues that written home-school contracts are inherently culturally biased, as they do not take into consideration parent's childrearing views. These contracts overstep parent-

teacher boundaries with demands, for instance, about technology use or children's bedtimes (2005).

Vincent, 2005 attributes an imbalance of power between working-class and/or ethnic minority parents and education professionals to the fact that schools and legislators have a wealth of knowledge that is not shared by the parents of the students they serve. This suggests that instead of parent-teacher contracts, professionals in education ought to share their knowledge about how education systems work with parents in order to empower parents to be deeply invested in their children's education. A teacher-led advocacy-training model would fulfill this need. Gore, 1993 argues (as cited in Vincent, 2005) that the unfortunate social definition of empowerment in education has often been defined as a need to achieve social justice where teachers let go of some of their powers when they assign responsibilities to parents. This view assumes that power cannot be shared, and instead that one has to rescind power so that someone else can have it (Vincent, 2005). Parent-teacher partnerships, Vincent argued, mistakenly suggest that the work between teachers and parents would be equal when the reality is that the power is leaning towards the schools. To Vincent, all current forms of parent involvement, such as volunteering at school events, are a façade that covers the real facts.

Not all views of parent-teacher partnerships are this negative. In an analysis of students who have succeeded academically against the odds there are some recurring trends. Partnerships between schools and parents are strong which is demonstrated by their work towards the same mission, the support from top school officials, and recognition of the importance of these relationships towards meaningful education reform. In addition to increased academic performance, parent involvement is linked to

increased self-esteem, school attendance, and fewer behavior problems. Parents in communities of diverse geographic and economic conditions who perceive a strong commitment from teachers and school principals are more likely to be involved in their children's education but programs where parents are expected to take a teacher's instructional role have not proven to be effective (Swap, 1993).

Programs that promote parental involvement have existed for more than 100 years, and their missions have evolved from home intervention towards language and socialization to current models that seek to empower parent participation (Olivos, et al., ed., 2011). Researchers have also approached parental involvement from different angles, such as linking parental engagement and achievement with monetary gain (Jeynes, 2002) and the Epstein's elaboration of different parental involvement stages (Epstein, 2002 & Epstein, 2004). In *The Smartest Kids in the World*, author Amanda Ripley argued, however, that those are "meaningless ways of participation" (2013).

While Epstein's model for parent involvement is widely employed, its design is non-applicable to families of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Researchers Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman (2007) conducted an alternative study in three Chicago, IL schools that have demonstrated success with at-risk students. After interviewing parents, researchers concluded that only two of Epstein's six areas of recommendation were considered applicable to the students' success. Parenting and learning at home was determined as existent, but parents were not involved in school communication, collaboration or decision-making activities despite their wish to do so.

As cited in Ripley, 2013, in a 2010 Time Magazine poll, over 50% of the participants think that more parental involvement is one of the most important strategies

to address the achievement gap experienced by Hispanics and Blacks, but these parents' attempts are often ignored. Marginalized families may show their involvement in their children's education at home instead of parental activity at school (Moreno & Lopez, 1999). Teachers and administrators, however, often misinterpret this perceived absence, as negligence towards their children's education (Moreno & Valencia, 2011). The engagement strategies employed by low-income and parents of color go unnoticed because they do not meet the mainstream criteria for parent involvement. The socially acceptable criterion for parent involvement is often limited to attending parent-teacher association meetings, volunteering in the classroom, and part taking in school fundraising efforts (Auerbach, 2007; Olivos, et al., ed., 2011).

In the case of Black parents, teachers often interpret their absence at school events such as Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and other school programs as signs of apathy and disinterest (Winters, 1993). Educators should instead recognize that these absences are a result of the parents' lack of knowledge about negotiating the complex systems and relationships in public schools. The history of neglect and abuse towards Blacks should also be considered as a source of distrust (Winters, 1993). Schools have not done enough to make Black families feel welcomed and appreciated in the school setting. Alienating these families is harmful to Black students and deprives the schools from the strengths and resources that parents from diverse backgrounds can bring (Winters, 1993). Despite federal and private sources of funding, the majority of our public schools fail to develop meaningful programs to engage their parents, which has a negative effect on Black students. The lack of diversity affects students because they do not see their culture represented in the lessons that they

are learning (Winters, 1993). All these factors result in higher illiteracy rates, lower standardized test-scores, crime, teacher resignations, and parent apathy towards the educational system (Winters, 1993).

Kunjufu (2002) argued that public schools have been designed to teach white, middle class students, which poses additional challenges to parents of color, especially if they are poor. Kunjufu poses that Black students have negative experiences in American public schools because the school system is not compatible with their learning styles. One example is that in Black households children learn to think and make decisions in crowded environments, whereas they are expected to function in unnaturally quiet classrooms. Kunjufu also blames irrelevant curricula that exclude the contributions of people of color, and to teachers with low expectations for their minority students (2002). For Black children, there are three identities in play: their position as members of American society, as members of a distinct cultural/racial group, and as members of an oppressed group (Noguera, 2008).

Teaching Bicultural Students

The situation for Hispanic, African Americans, and American Indian students is critical, but the literature below suggests that effective models of parent engagement may be effective in reducing the racial educational gap. Studies show that when parents of color are actively engaged in their children's education, students' academic achievement increases. While this idea is promising, the literature review also shows that levels of adequate parent engagement are not clearly defined and that efforts to engage most parents through district and schools programs are not reaching the majority of families (Olivos, et al., ed., 2011).

Diversity and culture are not the same. Teachers who understand this difference are better able to embrace the diversity of their students and their families. Someone's culture can be explained as their way of life whereas diversity applies to those with characteristics, qualities, beliefs, and mannerisms that differ from predetermined society norms (Berger & Riojas-Cortes, 2012). Many of our students in the United States are growing up in biracial, bicultural, and bilingual households, and many of them belong to underrepresented groups such as Hispanics and Blacks (Berger & Riojas-Cortes, 2012). Because of diversity in the classrooms, teachers must engage in culturally relevant teaching practices (Berger & Riojas-Cortes, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995). While this concept has changed in the past few years, culturally relevant pedagogy addresses student achievement while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities in schools The practice also includes using culturally relevant teaching materials that reflect children's identities and home cultures (Berger & Riojas-Cortes, 2012).

Bicultural Parent Engagement

There are multiple labels that refer to students' families and their involvement with schools. Terms such as involvement, collaboration, engagement, participation, and partnerships have been used to define the relationship, but there is no consensus as to how these terms are similar or different or if they have the same goal in mind (Olivos, et al., ed., 2011). In *Bicultural Parent Engagement,* Adrian Olivos et al., ed., 2011 contend that all forms of parent involvement in public schools are not the same, and that school authorities do not treat all parents equally. For bicultural parents, the editors argued, meaningful school participation is elusive because the parents have not had a say to decide what the nature of their involvement in schools should be. Other players, such as

school officials, researchers, and legislators may decide that the involvement should be educational, social, behavioral, political, and sometimes, none of the above (Olivos, et al., ed., 2011). For many policy makers and educators the focus goal has been academic achievement, and it is often suggested that parent involvement is a sure way to address the educational achievement gap that plagues non-white students (Allen, 2007; Boethel, 2003). If bicultural parents were prompted instead to take on more social and political aspects of their children's education through civic engagement, the parents would be able to change the political consciousness that helps define policy changes that address the challenges of "low-quality schools" (Olivos, et al., ed., 2011).

Teacher's Dispositions

A typical teacher believes that the nature of positive parent involvement in schools is defined as parents who support the school rules and regulations towards discipline and who attend parent-teacher conferences (Howe & Simmons, 2005). The role of parents should be more active than this, but it is up to teachers to create an environment that allows parents' active involvement in their child's education. The first step is to open welcoming communication channels to parents, followed by a teacher's positive disposition towards the parents that he or she will be working with. To this end, teachers and parents ought to work under the assumption that they are both working towards the students' best interests (Howe & Simmons, 2005). While there may be parents who seem uninterested, research shows that all parents care about their children's welfare. The lack of participation in those parents may be often attributed to external factors. These problems range from financial pressure to overwhelming life events, and their own lack of schooling and positive life experiences (Wolfendale, 1992).

Teachers and parents also need to agree that despite their instructional differences, it is possible to reach an agreement that would lead to the students' progress (Howe & Simmons, 2005). Parents are their children's first educators. It is in the home where children acquire language, concepts, and social processes (Wolfendale, 1992). Parents can also have a noticeable involvement in their children's reading skills, language development, and their children's mathematical number sense (Wolfendale, 1992). Teachers and parents' skills complement each other to create a positive learning environment that offers good skills, fresh perspectives, and new insight. For this to happen, however, teachers must welcome parents to be involved and to contribute. This involvement goes beyond parents as recipients of school updates and information, but also allowing parents to offer their opinion and advice in the decision making process (Wolfendale, 1992).

Parent Involvement vs. Parent Partnerships

Teachers and parents need to assume a shared responsibility for the outcome of the students' educational achievement, and to understand that there are differences between parent involvement and parent partnership. In a partnership, both actors participate actively in the decision-making process, and during the implementation of any changes. Both parties are also perceived as members with equal strengths and expertise where the members have reciprocal gains and investment towards the cause. In partnerships, both partners share the responsibility for success or failure, and keep each other accountable (Wolfendale, 1992). Informing parents about students' progress and reaching out to them promptly if there are any issues is important (Howe & Simmons, 2005), but for parents in effective parent-teacher relationships, just listening to teachers is

too passive. Parents should be empowered to have an input in the decision making process (Olivos, et al., ed., 2011). Professional communication is also open, honest, clear, professional, and confidential (Howe & Simmons, 2005).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001 stipulates that schools that receive Title I funds ought to involve parents in decisions concerning school improvement plans. Districts have the responsibility to create programs to involve parents and to keep them informed about their students' progress in school. While these mandates are written as part of the law, there are no specific guidelines for schools to follow, and these requirements are followed through in a manner that informs parents rather than engaging and involving them (Olivos, et al., ed., 2011). Alliances between parents and schools should not be limited to specific ethnic groups and school administration. Schools should also empower alliances between Hispanics and African Americans for instance, in order to address the challenges that affect both groups (Olivos, et al., ed., 2011).

Parent Knowledge and Existing Parent-Academy Information

Nocera, 1991 argued (as cited in Noguera, 2008) that one of the reasons middle-class students perform well in schools is that their parents are empowered to insist on high-quality education. Middle-class parents are able to do this because they have a clear sense of what defines good education. They also have the means to pull their children out of low-performing schools if necessary (Noguera, 2008). Affluent parents commonly follow practices that lead their children to the best education opportunities and they also have access to literature that outlines how to better advocate for their children's education. These practices have been documented in books such as Gene I. Maeroff's *The Smart-School Parent*, 2012 and *The New Public School Parent, 2002* by former

president of the National Education Association (NEA) Bob Chase. In *The New Public School Parent* (Chase & Katz, 2002) for instance, Chase invites parents to shop and evaluate schools in the same manner they would evaluate a big purchase. According to Chase and Katz, parents need to examine their children's school environment and to review their children's teachers' qualifications in order to choose the teacher they want for their child (Chase, & Katz, 2002). Similarly, in *The School-Smart Parent*, 2012, Maeroff actively encourages parents to advocate for their children's education by choosing the right daycare, the right preschools, and even the right extracurricular activities for their children. Maeroff speaks to parents with a great sense of urgency, and advises the parents to consider foreign languages, technology opportunities, and building their children's character (Maeroff, 2012).

Aside from school and teacher "shopping," Chase and Katz do offer other recommendations that could be applicable to parents of color living in poverty, as long as the information is made available to them (2002). Parents of low socioeconomic status may not have the knowledge or resources to benefit from this type of literature, but teachers who serve children of color living in poverty have an opportunity to make this kind of information available to their students' parents. This is the need addressed during the course of this research. All parents should feel empowered and have the tools to develop, and fight for, the educational plan that they want for their children.

Chapter Summary

The literature review presents recurrent themes. There is an education crisis affecting Hispanic and African American students across the nation. While poverty and

lower socioeconomic status are undeniable factors in racial education inequity, the issue also affects students of color who live in affluent neighborhoods. The available literature concludes that parental involvement in their children's education is important, but the realm of what parent involvement looks like exist in a large spectrum. On one side, there are the researchers who strongly believe in parent-teacher models where parents are expected to be educational tutors and to be actively engaged in school activities. On the other side, there are researchers who view the latter theory for involvement as oppressive for its demands to force parents to participate in activities that do not appeal to them. In the middle of this spectrum, there are researchers who argue that parental involvement in schools can be very beneficial as long as parents find their participation to be valuable and capable of results. This is true even if parents do not volunteer in classrooms or serve as field trip chaperones.

In the review of the literature, there are suggestions for parental engagement that have specific missions for students of color, such as attending college. These parents are partners in policy making and advocacy with great potential to exert change. They are also critical thinkers who evaluate schools and teachers and who inquire about their child's progress and challenges. Taking into consideration what the literature concludes as best practices, a teacher-led parent academy would transform parent academy models. An elementary teacher's unique position provides the time and opportunity to engage parents, to educate them about the challenges that Black and Latino students face, and to help parents develop a plan that would help them lead their children to achieve college education. Such model does not include chaperone duties, but does not exclude them either. The roles for parents may change, and ultimately, the model that works is that

which parents feel that they own (Swap, 1993).

Limitations of Scope

Due to the lack of similar programs, research about teacher-led parent academies is not readily available. While teacher-parent contact is often required and encouraged by school leadership, teachers already have very limited time during the work day to plan lessons and to attend school required professional development sessions. Given these limitations, it's safe to speculate that concerns may be raised regarding the time commitment required to carry out parent-advocacy and empowerment training. To address these limitations, questions of this nature were presented to the participants who fulfill educator duties. Their answers are available in Chapter Four.

The research design to conduct this investigation is outlined in Chapter Three. Chapter Three describes the chosen research paradigm, the subjects, and the participants. Finally, it explains the treatment and implementation plan. The results of the research study are published in Chapter Four, while Chapter Five provides suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Chapter Overview

The literature review illustrates the racial inequity in education that adversely affects Hispanic and Black students in the United States. The literature also supports the claim that parental engagement in education can be very successful to improve students' academic performance. The issue at hand is, however, that current models of parent engagement programs are not addressing properly the needs and cultural differences of students of color. The research in this capstone addresses this need through answers to the following question: *What are teachers and parents' attitudes toward a teacher led parent advocacy model that addresses education inequity in Minnesota?*

This chapter outlines the methods that were implemented in order to conduct the research, the justification for participants, the setting, and the research paradigm. The question was explored using a qualitative method approach based on interviews. The foundation on this research is that parent involvement is important, but that in order to be effective, it needs to be focused on family and child strengths; it needs to provide families and teachers with lifelong learning; and it needs to be grounded on culturally responsive practices (Giovacco-Johnson, 2009). Prior to creating an effective model to empower parents, it is important to learn directly from families and teachers about their needs.

Qualitative Research Paradigm

The research was conducted using qualitative methods, including interviews and questionnaires. These were the most flexible tools to explore the research question where the intimate setting between the researcher and participants elicited candid responses from the participants. Interviews eliminate the biased questions that may result from the most carefully drafted survey. Interviews also allow the research to ask clarifying questions, an option that is not available through other research methods (Creswell, 2009). The responses during the interviews include valuable information, and through qualitative methods, the transcripts are readily available. One limitation of interviews is that they are time consuming, and this limits the number of participants that were invited to take part in this research. While the parents were interviewed directly, teachers were asked to fill-out a short questionnaire on their own with the knowledge that clarification questions might follow if needed. With only two questions to answer, follow-up questions were not needed.

Data Collection

Upon approval from the Human Subject Research Committee and from the school Principal, all twenty-five families in the researcher's first grade classroom received an invitation to participate in an interview. In the case of teacher samples, five teachers from the kindergarten and first grade level teams received an invitation to participate and they were asked to fill-out a short questionnaire that included demographic questions. Kindergarten and first grade teachers were chosen to match the first grade student

sample. Teachers were asked to turn-in their questionnaires to the researcher early in the summer, while the school year was still fresh in their minds.

In the case of parents, interviews were scheduled at the parent's convenience. The letters of invitation and consent to participate were sent home in their preferred language. In order to secure a larger sample of participants, a second invitation was sent home to parents who did not respond to the first request, and phone calls were made in order to clarify the process. In the results chapter, participants' responses are listed under pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. As part of the interviews, demographic data was also collected (see Appendix A). The questions include ethnicity, age, native language, years of education, and family composition. This information was useful to draw conclusions and to analyze trends upon completion of the interviews. The interview tool that guided the conversation for parents is available in Appendix B; whereas the questionnaire tool for teachers is available in Appendix C. Interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate transcripts. The research was conducted ethically with most respect for participants' confidentiality. The participants signed consent letters, and they were reassured that their real names, or any other information that may identify them, would not be released.

Data Sample: The Elementary School

The school is an urban magnet school with a dual language focus. In its capacity as a dual language immersion, the school aims to admit 50% of native Spanish speakers, and 50% of non-Spanish speakers at the kindergarten level. All Minneapolis families are welcome to apply and those students who are admitted receive transportation. Overall,

the school runs full programs from kindergarten to fifth grade. In the 2014-2015 year, the school served approximately 550 students. 73% of the students were Hispanic, 15% were white Americans, 10% were Black, and less than 1% of students were Native or Asian American. 55% of students received English language services and 83% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Students in kindergarten, first, and second grade receive 90% of their instruction in Spanish and 10% of instruction in English. In subsequent years, the English language instruction increases and by fifth grade, the English/Spanish ratio is 50/50.

Data Sample: Participants

As stated before, the research participants are a group of parents in the researcher's first grade classroom and a group of kindergarten and first grade teachers from the elementary school. Six out of twenty-five families chose to participate in the interviews, and five out of five teachers chose to fill-out the questionnaire. Detailed information about participants' demographic information is available in Chapter Four. The final sample, while small, resulted in an accurate representation from the first grade sample based on race and educational achievement. The teacher sample is also representative of the participants.

Data Analysis

The interview questions were categorized in four parts in order to facilitate analysis of the responses. Upon completion of data collection, the responses were used to draw conclusions between opinions, trends, or comments and the participants'

demographic information. Differences and similarities in these areas were evaluated and direct connections with the reviewed literature were stated. In *Action Research* (2007), Mills argues that a teacher's job is inherently that of an active participant observer (Mills, 2007). During the interview sessions, participants were observed, and their attitudes, engagement, and participation levels were noted.

Chapter Summary

A qualitative research paradigm has been created in order to investigate parent and teachers' attitudes towards a teacher-led parent advocacy-training model. This model comes as an approach to eliminate educational inequities that affect Hispanic and Black students in Minnesota. The results from the interviews are presented in Chapter Four. The conclusion to the responses and next steps are available in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Chapter Overview

The previous chapter outlined both the research design that was used in order to conduct this research and the justification for using qualitative methods. The qualitative methods approach used in this project includes parent interviews with the researcher and a teacher questionnaire that was completed independently. The parent interview tool was designed to learn about parents' goals for their children, to measure parents' knowledge about access to higher education, and to assess parents' attitudes towards parent advocacy academies led by teachers. The questionnaire tool for teachers was designed to investigate teachers' attitudes about leading potential parent leadership academies. The purpose of these inquiries was to answer the following question: *What are teachers and parents' attitudes toward a teacher led parent advocacy model that addresses education inequity in Minnesota?*

In this chapter, the interview process, results, analysis, and key findings during the interviews are presented.

Letters of Invitation

Upon approval from the Human Subject Research Board of the interview tools, all twenty-five families in the researcher's first grade classroom, and five kindergarten and first grade teachers received letters of invitation to participate in the research. The letters of invitation for parents were available in both English and Spanish. Each family received the Letters of Invitation and Consent to Participate forms in their preferred language.

From the twenty-five letters of invitation sent, six families and all the teachers that were invited agreed to participate. As per instructions in the letters, each parent who agreed to participate was contacted by phone to schedule an interview. The five teachers also received their questionnaires and all agreed to participate. The interviews were conducted during the month of June in 2015, and the teachers' questionnaires were collected by June 17, 2015.

Key Findings

In the analysis of responses some key findings were concluded. These include: 1) even when parents were aware of the barriers that race and income can impose on education, all parents have envisioned higher education in their children's future, 2) the parent interview responses reflect a void of information for all respondents whose income is low or who have less than 12 years of formal education, 3) none of the parents felt that they had any power in challenging or impacting school district decisions, 4) all parents with education attainment levels below the 12th grade claimed a preference for teachers over outsiders to receive parent education and advocacy training, but parents with higher

education attainment levels were open to training that is facilitated by organizations outside the school, 5) all parents were highly interested in regular collaboration with their children's teachers, 6) while teachers felt that they could be a good resource for parents' education, they were concerned about teacher burnout as a result of increased responsibilities.

It is important to clarify that while connections between parents' responses and demographic characteristics have been made, this analysis does not intend to suggest generalizations for diverse groups of people in the urban school community. The insights collected during this research represent a small number of parents and teachers, and further research in a larger scale is needed to build on the findings hereby presented.

The Parent Interview Process

Six interviews took place as scheduled during the month of June 2015. Three interviews were conducted in parents' homes and three interviews were conducted in a private room at the elementary school. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. In order to protect the privacy of all participants, pseudonyms were used. While the interview tool includes several questions, not all questions were presented to all participants because in some instances some questions did not seem to apply, or because parents had already answered those questions as part of their commentary in previous inquiries.

Introduction to Participants: Parents

While the sample size of participants is small, the six participants are representative of the students who were enrolled in the researcher's classroom this past school year and their families. In regards to gender, of the six participants, five are mothers, and one is a father. All parents are in heterosexual marriages. During one of the interviews with a mother, the father was also present but since he had arrived home after the interview started, he chose not to participate in the interview. In this section, each parent is introduced in order to allow the reader some context when discussing their responses to the questions later in this chapter. For a detail of participant demographics side by side, please refer to Table 4.1.

Denise is a 33-year-old Black woman and she has lived in Minneapolis, MN all her life. Denise is not currently employed, but she is enrolled in a GED Program. Denise lives with her spouse and her child. Everyone at home speaks English, which is everyone's first language. Denise's child qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch at school.

Rosa is 31-years-old and she is an immigrant from Ecuador. Rosa and her husband have three children, a 7-year-old and a set of 5-year-old twins. During the interview, Rosa claimed regret for not taking advantage of education opportunities when she was younger in Ecuador. Rosa dropped out of high school and migrated to the United States in her early 20s. She has two jobs and a challenging work schedule. She has to work evenings and nights while her husband works during the day to ensure that there is always at least one parent at the home. Everyone at home speaks Spanish, but Rosa's

husband is fluent in English as well. Rosa's children qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Dolores is 28-years-old and she is an immigrant from Mexico. Dolores and her husband have two children, a first grader and a toddler. Their native language is Spanish. Both Dolores and her husband work full-time while their children go to school and home childcare. During the interview, Dolores said that she completed high school, but she did not continue her studies. Dolores's school age daughter qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch.

Elizabeth is white and she was born in the Northeast region of the United States. Elizabeth is 39-years-old and she lives in Minneapolis with her husband and their two children. Their native language is English. Both Elizabeth and her spouse are employed full-time and have advanced degrees. Elizabeth's children do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

John is 41-years-old. He and his wife are both immigrants from Southeast Asia. John holds a doctorate degree, and he is in the process of pursuing a second doctorate degree. John is currently employed as a legal consultant. John lives with his wife and their two children who are 7 and 9 years old respectively. John and his family members speak both English and Hmong at home. John's wife is employed full-time. John's children do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch at school.

Mary is 33 years old and she is both white and African American. Mary is originally from Minneapolis where she lives with her husband and their two children under the age of seven. Both Mary and her husband are employed full-time. Mary is currently working on her master's degree capstone thesis. Mary's children qualify for

free or reduced-price lunch, but she noted that it was not the case during the previous

school year. The participants' demographics are summarized as follows in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Interview Participant Demographic Information

Parent Name - Gender	Age Range	Ethnicity/ Place of Birth	Level of Education	Employment Status	Household Composition	Qualifies for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch?
Denise (F)	25-34 years old	African American (MN)	Some High School	Student	Married, 1 child	Yes
Rosa (F)	25-34 years old	Hispanic (Ecuador)	Some High School	Employed	Married, 2 children	Yes
Dolores (F)	25-34 years old	Hispanic (Mexico)	High School	Employed	Married, 2 children	Yes
Elizabeth (F)	35-44 years old	White (NE State)	Master's Degree	Employed	Married, 2 children	No
John (M)	35-44 years old	Hmong (SE Asia)	Doctorate Degree	Employed	Married, 2 children	No
Mary (F)	35-44 years old	Mixed: White and African American	Master's Degree	Employed	Married, 2 children	Yes

Parent Sample Demographic Analysis

The parent sample contains a balanced mix in the areas of age, ethnicity, educational attainment, and socioeconomic status as measured by their eligibility to free or reduced-price lunch. In regards to gender and household composition, however, the sample is very homogenous.

Out of the six parents who participated in the interviews, three fall into the 25-34 year-old range and three parents fall into the 35-44 year-old range. In the area of ethnicity, one parent (Denise) identifies as African American, two parents (Rosa and

Dolores) identify as Hispanics, one parent (Elizabeth) identifies as white, one parent (John) identifies as Hmong, and one parent (Mary) listed that she is biracial. Only one parent (Denise) is unemployed. All parents are married and have two children.

In regards to education attainment, one parent (Denise) is currently completing her GED. One parent (Rosa) dropped out of high school while she still lived in Ecuador. One parent (Dolores) finished high school in Mexico. Two parents (Elizabeth and Mary) hold master's degrees and one parent (John) holds a doctorate degree. All undergraduate and graduate degrees were earned in universities in the United States. The parent sample composition in the area of immigration is divided equally. Three parents migrated to the United States (Rosa, Dolores, and John), but only John speaks English with native proficiency. Both Rosa and Dolores speak Spanish as their first language and have very limited knowledge of English. Denise, Elizabeth, and Mary were born in the United States and speak English as their first language.

Parent Interview Results

Part I: Parents' Thoughts about College and College Opportunity

The first part of this interview was designed to understand the parents' hopes and dreams for their children and their reflections about college opportunities. Participants' responses in this area are consistent with a theory that emerged during the literature review regarding a parent's socioeconomic status and their education expectations for their children. Noguera argued that middle-class students perform well in school because their parents are empowered to insist on higher education. According to Noguera, middle class parents are able to do this because they have a good sense of what defines good

education (2008). When the participants were asked about their educational hopes for their children, all parents said that it was their wish to see their children go to college, but those without college education themselves are willing to consider other options for their children.

Denise, for instance, would like to see her son graduate from college, but she also thinks that a police academy may be a good career choice for her son Marvin. Dolores is unsure about what they future will hold for her daughters, but she stated that college might be the best option so that her daughters can obtain a good job. In Dolores' mind, the decision to go to college rests will be each daughter's choice. Wolfendale (1992) suggests that uncertainty such as the one shown by these parents may be grounded on financial pressure and their own lack of schooling. This could be true for Dolores since she did not continue her studies beyond high school.

In contrast to Denise and Dolores, parents Elizabeth, John, and Mary, who have pursued advanced degrees, claimed that they would not accept any other option for their children. These parents have a stronger sense of ownership in their educational goal for their children and this may be because having achieved college degrees, they already know what it takes to apply, afford, attend, and graduate from institutions of higher education. Rosa was an exception to this situation. During the interview, Rosa demonstrated regret at "wasting educational opportunities" in Ecuador, which led her to drop out from high school. This regret is guiding Rosa in her resolve that her children will go to college "no matter what" even when she does not know yet what the process looks like, or how she and her family will afford sending three children to college.

In John's case, his determination to send his children to college is grounded in his own experience as someone who through education was able to overcome the poverty cycle that he might have faced as an immigrant and refugee growing up in poverty in the United States. John asserted that his children are expected to enroll in traditional four-year colleges and beyond. He also added that technical or community college applications would not be considered during the college application process in his household. Both Elizabeth and Mary stated their wishes to see their children working in a career that they love, but that is also lucrative so that they can support themselves and their families. Mary added that she hoped that her children would grow to be adults with the necessary social, emotional, and physical skills to support themselves. Mary also expects her children to develop a "moral compass" that guides them towards good financial decisions and to distinguish right from wrong.

Parents' idea of their children's educational path. The majority of responses regarding the path to college show a direct relationship between a parent's level of formal education and their knowledge of how the college application process works. This includes the areas of college admissions, extracurricular activities, and financial aid. While all participants had previously said that they wanted their children to go to college, when asked about the educational path that their children would follow, some parents had clearer visions than others. Denise and Dolores's plans were unclear, Elizabeth and Mary were more specific, but John and Rosa were the ones who showed more conviction in their goals with a "no matter what" attitude regarding college. Denise wants her son to go to college, but she thinks he can only do that if he gets good grades in high school. Denise is hoping that her son plays team sports in high school because in order to be part

of the team, her son would have to maintain good grades. To Denise, team sports would help her son stay motivated and focused on his studies. When presented with the same question, Dolores does not have an educational roadmap for her daughters in mind. Dolores said that she has not given this question much thought, but that she supposes she could start "asking around" in order to get the information.

Elizabeth and Mary's visions, in contrast, are very clear and resemble their own higher education journeys. Elizabeth thinks that her children will follow what she perceives as "the traditional path" from high school to college and potentially graduate school. Mary hopes that her children enroll in college to complete their undergrad studies right after high school. She hopes they take some general courses before they decide on a degree that matches their interests and passions, but that is also lucrative. Mary says that she feels torn between sending her children to a college out of state or to a college that is closer to home. She is concerned that if her children are too far away, she may not have the financial resources to help them come home to visit during holiday or summer breaks. Elizabeth and Mary's responses demonstrate a reflection in their own college journeys, including awareness for possible financial constraints and their conviction that their children will most likely need to utilize student loans.

John also has a very clear timeline of his children's path to college. By 8th grade, John wants his children to have developed a love for learning, good study habits, and strong reading and writing skills. John's children are also expected to graduate from high school and to enroll in a good university. John says that his children will not enroll in two-year colleges because he believes that these institutions are not designed for people that want to continue their studies beyond the two years. In analyzing parents' responses

about the educational roadmap that they envision for their children a pattern emerged. Parents' levels of detail about their education goals for their children seem to be directly proportional to their own levels of education attainment.

Parents' thoughts on equal opportunity. Upon assessing the participants' goals for their children, parents were asked about their opinion about college enrollment for all children. To this end, parents were asked: "Do you think that all children should be going to college?" While all participants want their own children to go to college, many of them answered that college is not for everyone.

Denise felt that college is not for everybody because some children lack interest in education or intellectual ability. Denise feels that joining the armed forces may be a good alternative for some children. Both Dolores and Rosa agree that all children should be going to college, but they were not ready to explain their answers beyond affirming that college is the best choice to secure a good future. Elizabeth did not feel that college is always a necessary path and that there are children who may not want to go to college. These children, in her opinion, need alternative training opportunities that lead to lucrative careers and that schools should be offering those programs.

In his capacity as an immigrant coming from a modest background, John thinks that the decision to go to college depends on the child's socioeconomic background. John thinks that children from affluent backgrounds may not need to go to college because their network and "personal capital" would ensure that they obtain lucrative employment. In contrast, John thinks that for immigrants or children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, college is potentially the only way out of poverty. John posits that children growing in poverty need both the academic knowledge and networking connections that

college can provide. Along the same lines, Mary values college education for its benefits both inside and outside the classroom. To Mary, college offers a cultural and social experience beyond the academics that prepare children with important life skills. Mary thinks that all children should be given the opportunity to go to college.

When parents were asked if all children could succeed in the United States notwithstanding their race or income, their answers could be placed alongside a continuum. Denise felt that it is possible, but only if parents are involved in schools because the schools cannot do the job alone. Likewise, Rosa thinks that all children can go to college, but that unfortunately, too many parents in her community of Hispanic parents leave all education responsibilities to the teachers. John argued that all children can "make it" in America as long as they have the necessary resources. John asserts that regardless of your race or income, "if you have the smarts, and if you really want it, you can make it in this country."

Elizabeth, in contrast, stated that the question presented was very difficult because she is aware of the barriers that children of color often face. Elizabeth thinks that all children can succeed, but only if the barriers that affect children in poverty can be eliminated. Like Elizabeth, Mary thinks that children of color or living in poverty can succeed, but she recognizes that they face many obstacles, setbacks, and that they need to work harder than their white or affluent counterparts. To Mary, children of color or growing up in poverty need to face additional "hoops" to succeed. Some examples were the need for Black students to proof themselves as valuable, the need to adapt to the norms and culture of mainstream [white/affluent] society, and the fear to have a financial setback which is likely to originate from the lack of a strong financial base to begin with.

Mary's response is a reflection from her own struggles as a biracial individual who had to overcome the many difficulties hereby listed in order to obtain her master's degree.

Part II: Parents' Self-Assessment On Their Own Knowledge and Resources

Upon answering questions about hopes and dreams for their children and their views on college opportunity, parents were asked a set of questions to probe their knowledge about leading a child towards the college admission process. The questions prompted parents to self-assess their knowledge of the barriers that interfere with a child's chance to higher education and the supports they think they have at their disposal to put their children on the path to college.

Denise thinks that she has the resources that she needs. As referenced earlier, Denise thinks that the most important thing a parent can do is to be involved in his or her child's education. Compatible with this mindset, Denise said that her son's chances to go to college are high because she pays attention to what happens in school and because her child is enrolled in extracurricular programs such as after-school programs and summer school. Denise also asserts that she has established a strong reading schedule at home.

Rosa, however, did not feel confident about having the resources that she needs to lead her children to college even when she is very adamant about this goal. Rosa feels that it is still early to find out about college applications and information, but that she will seek help when her now very young children enter high school. When the time comes, Denise plans to do research to find scholarships because she is aware that college is expensive. Dolores, on the other hand, does not feel confident about having the educational resources that she needs for her children, but she says that she and her

husband dedicate enough time to their children and that the family is able to provide what their children need.

In Elizabeth's case, she thinks that she and her husband are good role models for their children because they both have advanced degrees. Elizabeth said that she and her husband are able to set college goals, and to afford books, camps, and music lessons for their children. Elizabeth and her husband also have time to spend with their children and they have a strong family network to support them. John thinks that while he thinks he knows what his children need, he and his wife do not have the monetary resources to make it happen. John would like to enroll his children in private school because in his opinion private schools have a strongest focus on academics. Mary feels that she has the resources to instill in her children the hopes that she has for them, but she still worries. Mary is concerned that despite her best efforts, if the schools fail to educate her children well they will not be able to grow to be stable financially. Parents' responses in this section suggests that regardless of their income, education, or employment, most parents demonstrate a concern about not being able to provide the best resources for their children.

After reviewing parents' self-assessment of their own resources to support their children's education, parents were asked specific questions about the education system. When asked to explain their knowledge of Common Core and standardized testing their answers were mixed. Denise and Dolores said that they had never heard either one of those terms. Rosa said that she did not know about Common Core standards, but that she had limited information about standardized testing. She understands that "there are tests that schools give the students to find out if they are performing well." She also knows

that the score on those tests are "saved" and that they are used in college applications suggesting that Rosa's knowledge of standardized testing relates to SAT exams or ACTs. Elizabeth and John said that they were well aware about both.

When Mary was asked, she said that she did not know a lot about those concepts, but that she knew that those tests were culturally biased because "people who take the tests say that they include terms that are not known or spoken of in every household." Mary also thinks that so many hours of testing are not ideal for any child. She says that simple things to succeed in a test, such as a good night sleep, are not always possible for all children.

Parents' knowledge of the college admissions process. The importance of extracurricular and leadership experiences in college applications may be often overlooked by parents. To investigate how much parents knew about this topic, parents were asked to explain what they knew about extracurricular activities and to answer if they thought that they were important. Denise needed clarification and she was given some examples such as volunteer work, sports, or internships. Denise then answered that she thought that sports were a good idea. Rosa and Dolores said that they did not know what extracurricular activities were. Elizabeth thinks that extracurricular activities are important because of their experiential learning value, and because they allow children to stay active and engaged with their communities. John agrees that extracurricular activities are good because life is not all about academics and because colleges look beyond the academics when reviewing college applications.

Mary also knows the value of extracurricular activities. She thinks these activities are important because with her background in youth development, she knows that

children grow and learn in different environments. Mary states that there is a link between engaging in different activities and good academic performance. Mary is concerned, however, that some of the staff members in afternoon programs do not treat the children with respect. Participants' responses regarding extracurricular also reflect their own experiences as college students. Those parents without formal education past 12th grade need to be informed about developing educational roadmaps for their children so they can feel more empowered to support their children's efforts to go to college.

College admission requirements. Upon exploring the topic of extracurricular activities, parents were asked if they thought that all colleges had the same admission requirements. Denise thinks that there are differences in the requirements. She thinks that universities like Yale only admit students that are "super smart." Similarly, Mary thinks that colleges look at Grade Point Average (GPA) and ACT scores. Rosa thinks that the difference between colleges is that some are more expensive than others. Dolores does not think that all colleges have the same admission requirements. She thinks that some schools are more interested in the money than they are in the students because they only admit the rich students.

Elizabeth is certain that colleges have different admission requirements. She thinks that Ivy League schools admit students with characteristics that appeal to donors, whereas small liberal art colleges are more interested in applicant's philosophies. John asserts that all colleges have different admission requirements and that colleges explain the kind of qualities they look for in a student in their websites. John thinks that colleges seek to admit students that will be a good fit to the school based on their shared philosophies.

Paying for college. To continue the conversation about college, parents were asked about their plans to pay for college and to explain what they knew about scholarships and fellowships. Denise said that she was going to start a savings plan this year. In clarification, she was asked if she was going to open a college savings plans such as a 529 plan, but she said that she had never heard about those. Denise also said that she did not know much about scholarships or fellowships. Rosa is aware that college tuition varies by college. She also knows that there are scholarships, student loans, and financial assistance. Rosa said that if college was too expensive, her children were expected to work at least part-time to cover their expenses. Denise has heard on television that there are organizations that can help students find scholarships. Denise also knows that students can receive scholarships if they have good grades.

Dolores has never heard about scholarships and she is counting on covering her children's college expenses out of her own pocket so that they can focus on their studies. Elizabeth said that she and her husband will use college savings to cover college expenses and that they also have the support of extended family to cover the tuition fees. John will cover college expenses with dividends from his investments, and he also hopes that his children do well in high school so that they can tap on scholarship funds. Mary said that she and her husband have talked about college expenses, and they are aware that they need to save money. Mary and her husband are willing to pay for their children's college expenses as long as they have good grades, but she anticipates that her children will have to take student loans just like she did.

Part III: Parent-School Engagement and Leadership

      Parent-teacher collaboration. In order to learn about parents' levels of engagement with schools, parents were asked to explain their interactions with teachers during conferences. It was also important to understand the kind of supports that the school should provide to help parents guide their children's academic process.

      When Denise was asked about the kind of questions she discusses with the teacher during parent-teacher conferences, she said that she likes to know how her son is doing in school and how she can help him get better. Denise thinks that the school should provide her with support to learn Spanish phonics so that she can support her son as he learns how to read in Spanish. In Rosa's case, she said that she asks the teacher what she thinks are the "common" questions. She inquires about her son's behavior and his academic level on different subjects so that she can help him at home when his levels are low. Rosa opines that the school should offer 1:1 tutoring services at home to support students who are really low. During conferences, Dolores wants to know how her daughter is behaving and how she is doing in her classes.

      Mary's focus during conferences is mostly academic. She wants to hear from the teacher about how her son is doing in comparison with other kids, and about the things she should be working on at home with her child. In regards to the support expectations that she has for her children's teacher, Mary hopes that her children are challenged each day, but that they also feel valued at school. Mary wants her children to feel safe, but she also wants them to be encouraged to explore new things and to stand up for themselves. Mary views the school as an environment where students are exposed to age appropriate life and problem solving skills. John argues that good teachers make the most difference

in a child's education. Paul expects that the teachers have high hopes for his children and that teachers instill a highly academic culture in the classroom.

During conferences, Elizabeth wants to help the teacher understand her children and to learn how she can supplement their learning at home. She also thinks that to ensure a successful year, teachers and parents need to form a partnership where both parties feel supported. In regards to the best way that teachers can serve their students, Elizabeth hopes that the teachers can help her children discover their interests and lead them through careers that reflect those interests.

Helping with homework. To understand the family dynamics and needs regarding homework, parents were asked to explain how they felt about helping their children with homework. More specifically, parents were asked if they felt prepared to assist their children with the content. While Denise said that she is happy to help her son with his homework, she acknowledged that the homework in Spanish was too hard for her. Rosa said that she is able to help with math feels and that she is confident in her ability to help her children with most topics. In the case she is unable to help, she feels that she can go to the library or ask the older kids in her building for help.

Dolores, on the other hand, said that for the most part she has been able to help her first grader with homework. She anticipates that when her daughter is older she may need to purchase additional tools or resources in order to help her daughter with homework. John understands the connection between reading at home, completing homework, and establishing good study habits, but he admits that doing homework on weeknights is very difficult, and that directions in Spanish complicates things further. John said that at home, he and his wife make sure that their children read, or are read to,

every night despite their limited time during the evenings. John has also identified that there are differences between the way he can explain concepts to his son and the way that the teacher does it. John said that this causes confusion at home. Participants' responses to this question were pretty similar and their levels of confidence to help at home were generally low regardless of their own educational background. This suggests that even the most educated parents need support to understand the new teaching and learning practices that are characteristic of new Common Core standards. This is particularly true with mathematics. John for example, struggles to explain subtraction to his children using language that was used less than twenty years ago, such as "carrying the one," or finding missing numbers as early as first grade.

To further understand how teachers can assist parents, parents were asked about what they needed from their child's teacher. Denise, John, and Elizabeth said that they needed English directions with the homework. Rosa would like to receive calls immediately from the teacher if there were any issues in the classroom. Rosa added that keeping the parents informed is very important. Similarly, Dolores would like to be informed at all times about issues or events happening in the school. Mary wishes that her children's teachers are available to "touch base" with her as needed.

Parent-school interactions. In order to draw conclusions on the ways that parents prefer to be engaged with schools, parents were asked about their preferred channel of communication and time availability. When asked about their preferred way to be engaged in school, participants' responses reflect a discontent with current practices and opportunities for parent involvement at the elementary school. This is a challenge that has been documented in the literature review. Winters (1993), for instance, argued

that despite diverse sources of funding, the majority of our school districts fail to develop meaningful programs to engage parents. During the interview, Denise said that she appreciates phone calls from the teacher and enjoys attending parent-teacher meetings, but she said that the few school-sponsored events are not relevant or interesting to her. As an example, Denise referred to an event where parents are invited monthly to eat donuts and coffee with the principal at 7:45am. Denise claims that she does not like donuts and that no working parent is available to attend an event at that time in the morning.

In regards to this and similar events, both Denise and Elizabeth complained that they receive invitations to events with a very short notice usually in the form of an automated call the day before the event. Elizabeth said that the school should send invitations in writing. The school does share events in its yearly calendar, and the phone calls are meant to be a reminder, but the reactions from these parents suggest that more parental feedback is needed when determining the type of events that the school will sponsor and how those events are advertised. Like Denise, Rosa also prefers meetings, but she is not pleased with the agenda content within parent-teacher association meetings. Rosa expects more communication from the school principal where she and other parents could learn more about college readiness and about specific problems that may be happening in school. Rosa is concerned about the Hispanic parents that she knows and how unaware they are about their role in their children's education. Rosa argues that those parents would be happy to participate more if they knew about the expectations that the American education system has for them which is, in her opinion, different than the expectations in Central and Latin America. This comment reflects one of the patterns that

emerged in the literature review. School leaders need to be more intentional in addressing cultural differences if they want to increase participation from families of color.

Unlike Denise and Rosa, Elizabeth and Mary prefer scheduled 1:1 meetings with the teacher because attending school events is difficult for them. In Mary's case, while she enjoys volunteering at the school and the classroom, she would also appreciate monthly phone calls to receive updates specific to her children. Mary said that while e-mail correspondence is easy and efficient, e-mails often get lost or the message in them may be misunderstood. Mary sees the value in face-to-face meetings, but she admits that she is often too tired to go to the school in the evenings. When John was asked about attending school events, he said that while he does not mind attending school meetings, the content is often not relevant to him. John is already very knowledgeable about the education system and he does not want to go to school to discuss topics that he already knows. John's response suggests that school leaders need to differentiate the content for parent meetings in the same way teachers differentiate content for their students in the classroom. Parents will not come to the school if they feel they are not learning anything new or important.

Parents' perceptions of their influence in schools. Winters (1993) argues that too often school practices often provoke feelings of powerlessness among parents. To find out if the participants had this perception, parents were asked if they felt that they had any power to influence education in the school district. Their answers were very discouraging. In response to this question, Rosa was very vocal about the agenda that she would try to push if she had the power. She, however, feels that she does not have any. Some of her ideas are to make the school year longer, and to reduce the teacher-student

ratio in classrooms where there are low students. Additionally, Rosa would encourage

parents to be better at being involved in schools. In Denise's case, she said that while she

could bring something to their [school leaders'] attention, she was not sure if they would

listen. When Dolores was asked if she felt empowered to be able to make changes in the

district she did not think that she would be heard.

When asked the same question, Elizabeth said that she is very involved in her

daughter's school Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and that at that level, the

organization and its members have the power to impact decisions that affect the school.

She did not feel equally confident about having an impact that affects the whole school

district. Giving a specific example, Elizabeth shared that the PTA once invited

representatives from the school district to the PTA meeting so that the members could

share their concerns about a district proposal that was going to affect the school. The

results were not as Elizabeth and the PTA had anticipated. While the district

representatives were kind and listened, at the end their request was not honored.

Similarly, Mary does not feel that her voice would be heard. Mary can think of

suggestions for improvements, but she is not sure if other parents or the district would

agree that her concerns are valid or if they are a "big deal." Mary does not offer any input

and she does not know how much time she would have to follow up with her request or

suggestion if she ever made one.

Part IV: Thoughts on Teacher-Led Parent Academies

During the interview process it became apparent that there is a high need to

educate, engage, and empower parents to become leaders in the movement to eliminate

education inequity. This research explores how parents and teachers feel about a potential parent academy that is led by teachers, and the parents candidly offered their responses.

Denise said that it would be useful to learn from someone she already knows like her son's teacher. This was important to her because she felt that her son's teachers genuinely care about him. Dolores said that parent training was very important because many immigrants come to the U.S. thinking that the school districts here are similar to the ones in their countries of origin. Rosa also thinks that parents need to become literate. When asked if it mattered to her that the training is provided by teachers, parent-liaison, or organizations from outside the school, she said that as long as the teacher is prepared to lead the training effectively, she would prefer teachers because of the mutual relationship and trust between parents and teachers. Rosa added, however, that if the teachers are not prepared to train the parents, the teachers should let the experts lead the sessions.

Dolores said that she would prefer to learn new information from teachers because she would feel more at ease with someone she already knows. Mary prefers to learn from teachers because they can share advice that applies specifically to her children, and because teachers are better able to understand parents' concerns. Mary, however, also thinks that a trainer that does not belong to the school may have a different perspective. In contrast, Elizabeth said that she does not see the difference between a parent leading the training session or someone else. She added that there are benefits to both choices. Elizabeth thinks that when teachers lead the parent training sessions the parents may be more receptive because they already have a connection with the teacher. Elizabeth also

said that there is value in having an outsider lead the training because they may share a different perspective to the problem.

When asked about his opinion about parent academies, John said that previous academies offered by the school have not been useful to him. John suggested that before schools offer those trainings, they should survey the parents to find out what it is that they still need to learn. John said that with the use of a survey, the school would be able to tailor the academy content to the parents' needs. When asked about his opinion about teachers training parents versus trainers from outside the school, John shared his view about parents' attitudes towards schools:

> There is a continuum in parent engagement. On one end, there are
>
> the parents who would show up no matter what. Parents who are
>
> always engaged. In the middle, there are parents that would show
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> up as long as their needs are met. In the end, there are parents that
>
> will not come.

Under this assumption, John thinks that to the parents who are always present it would not matter who leads the training, whereas to the parents who do not participate often in schools would be better served by teachers. Overall, John suggested that all the lessons would have to be engaging to make sure that parents keep coming back to the trainings. In the end, those parents with lower formal education attainment and lower income prefer to learn from their children's teacher, but those parents with college degrees did not favor one instructor over the other.

Teachers Questionnaire Process

Given the nature of the proposed program that this research sought to investigate, teachers' attitudes and opinions were critical. Teachers were asked to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of leading training sessions for parents. The questions were presented to teachers with the disclaimer that their answers were being requested for research purposes only and not with the intent to recruit them to participate as instructors in a hypothetical teacher-led parent academy. All five teachers filled out their questionnaires independently, and they returned their forms to the researcher upon completion. Demographic information from the teachers who participated is available in Table 4.2., whereas teachers' responses to the questionnaire are available in Table 4.3.

Table 4.2: Teachers' Demographic Information

Teacher	Ethnicity/Place of Birth	Years Teaching
Deb	White/MN	20+
Martha	White/WI	10+
Betsy	White/MN	5+
Luisa	Hispanic/El Salvador	5+
Juana	Hispanic/Mexico	3+

The teacher sample was all female because there were no male teachers employed in kindergarten or first grade at the elementary school. Three of the teachers are white, and two of them have over ten years of teaching experience in a Spanish immersion setting. The two Hispanic teachers have been teaching for five years or less. Teachers' responses to the questionnaire were fairly similar regardless of their ethnicity or years of experience as seen in Table 4.3: Teachers' Responses.

Table 4.3: Teachers' Responses

Question: What do you feel are the advantages and disadvantages of having teachers lead parent education and advocacy academies?		
Teacher	Advantages	Disadvantages
Deb	• Teachers would get to know the parents • Teachers would get to understand better what parents need • The impact would be beyond the specific child in the teacher's classroom because it would benefit the other children in the household	• It's work intensive and it could impact classroom performance
Martha	• Teachers have the knowledge and the resources	• Social distance between teachers and parents. We should have parents lead the lessons
Betsy	• Teachers have the knowledge	• Parents may not relate to teachers. Instead of teachers, it would be better to have affinity groups with parents leading sessions. When grouped by race or socioeconomic status, parents could relate better with each other.
Luisa	• Knowing the system and two languages	• Teacher burnout
Juana	• Parents get educated with the support of people they know	• Parents may not come to the trainings • Work overload

Teachers' responses to the questionnaire were similar in that they all recognize

their worth as a good resource for parents. The two Hispanic teachers added to their

responses the importance of knowing two languages when approaching parents, and the

importance of the closer relationship between parents and teachers. A white teacher, in

contrast, did not think that parents would be able to confide in teachers whenever there

was a perceived difference in socioeconomic status. This teacher suggested that other parents, and not teachers, should lead instruction. All teachers showed concern in adding more tasks to their already growing list of responsibilities.

Chapter Summary

From an analysis of the interviews and questionnaires, and an examination of the responses against the literature, six key findings emerged: 1) even when parents were aware of the barriers that race and income can impose on education, all parents have envisioned higher education in their children's future, 2) the parent interview responses reflect a void of information for all respondents whose income is low or who have less than twelve years of formal education, 3) none of the parents felt that they had any power in challenging or impacting school district decisions, 4) all parents with education attainment levels below the 12th grade claimed a preference for teachers over outsiders to receive parent education and advocacy training, but parents with higher education attainment levels were open to training that is facilitated by organizations outside the school, 5) all parents are highly interested in regular collaboration with their children's teachers, 6) while teachers felt that in their roles as teachers they will be a good resource for parents' education, they were concerned about teacher burnout as a result of increasing their responsibilities. All of these lessons generally reflect the findings from the different authors in the literature review. The results also confirm the need to develop more meaningful ways for parental involvement within urban schools.

Even when these families bring different backgrounds in education, culture, and language, their responses reveal that the share many commonalities. All the participants

want the best for their children, and they also wish to be more informed about their

children's performance at school. These participants wish to learn more skills to assist

their children, but they all feel discouraged to offer feedback to school and district

leaders. Chapter Five reflects on these and other major topics that emerged in this

research. Chapter Five also considers possible implications and limitations of the study as

well as suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

Chapter Overview

I entered the teaching profession to address the injustice of having children's educational outcomes dictated by their zip codes. As a Latina, I worry about the low graduation rates among students of color in Minnesota, particularly because the state as a whole has a great reputation for its public schools and its rigorous teacher licensing requirements. Once I became a teacher, I became more aware of the misconception that parents of color are not involved in schools because they are not interested. The reality is that many parents are very involved in their children's education at home and not at school (Moreno & Lopez, 1999), but their absence in schools are perceived as negligence (Moreno & Valencia, 2011). In the fall of 2014, I decided to confront this issue through research. I decided to explore the best way to support families in my role as a teacher with the intent to eliminate the achievement gap that negatively affects students of color in Minnesota. With this goal in mind, I developed the following question: *What are teachers and parents' attitudes toward a teacher led parent advocacy model that addresses education inequity in Minnesota?*

The literature presented in Chapter Two confirms the statistics about racial education inequity in Minnesota as evidenced in reports that measure students' performance across the state and how they compared to other states and other countries

around the world (ACT, 2013; U.S. Department of Education Reports, 2012; Ripley, 2013). The literature review also asserts that current models for parent involvement in our schools are not relevant to the cultures and communities color that we serve (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Noguera, 2008; Olivos, et al., ed., 2011). In order to investigate my research question, I designed a qualitative methods approach that includes interviews and questionnaires for parents and teachers respectively. As outlined in Chapter Three, the interview tool for parents was designed with the intent to gauge their knowledge about schools, their hopes for their children, and their attitudes toward a parent academy that is led by teachers. The interview responses confirmed the patterns that emerged in the literature review regarding parents' knowledge about the education system and the cultural irrelevance of current parent involvement models in our schools.

The participants' responses were also uplifting. Winters (1993) encourages teachers to develop a mindset where they genuinely believe that all parents wish to do what is best for their children. Regardless of race, income, or educational attainment, all participants demonstrated a deep commitment to their children and a wish to take part in school improvement plans if school leaders were to let them. Parent involvement plans need to include parents' feedback and school leaders need to be more intentional telling parents that their presence and opinions are always welcomed and valued. These parents need to be involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating the policies that govern the schools that their children attend.

Implications for School Leaders

The information collected in this research can be used to develop strategies that allow our public schools to offer meaningful and relevant opportunities for parent engagement. There is a primary framework that needs to be taken into consideration when developing a plan. First, members in the school leadership teams should take into consideration the main takeaways that emerged from the parent interviews and the teacher questionnaires:

1) Even when parents were aware of the barriers that race and income can impose on education, parents tend to envision the best possible educational outcome for their children.

2) The parent interview responses reflect a need for content differentiation whenever parent education programs are attempted. The responses show both a void of information for all respondents whose income is low or who have less than twelve years of formal education, and apathy towards education training without new content among parents who are more knowledgeable about the topic.

3) None of the parents felt that they had any power in challenging or impacting school district decisions, but they have many ideas to offer if they are empowered to participate.

4) All parents with education attainment levels below the 12th grade claimed a preference for teachers over outsiders to receive parent education and advocacy training, but parents with higher education attainment levels are open to training that is facilitated by organizations outside the school.

5) All parents are highly interested in regular collaboration with their children's teachers.

6) While teachers felt that in their roles as teachers they will be a good resource for parents' education, they were concerned about teacher burnout as a result of increasing their responsibilities.

Upon consideration of these findings, school leadership teams should consider the following adaptations to currently accepted models of parent engagement, such as Epstein's, in order to offer more inclusive alternatives for parents of color and/or living in poverty and the teachers who educate their children:

1) Teachers should always assume best intentions from their students' parents even in the face of perceived absence at the schools.

2) Prior to developing and scheduling opportunities for parent events at the school, school leaders should assess parents to investigate the topics that parents would like to discuss and to gauge how much they already know or do not know in order to offer differentiated training sessions at the school.

3) School leaders need to be more intentional about empowering parents to participate in the policy-making process. Principals should inform parents about opportunities to attend hearings, planning meetings, and to encourage parents to become members in the diverse planning committees that advise the School Board.

4) School leaders should facilitate more opportunities for meaningful collaboration between parents and teachers. Considering that a teacher's workload is already too large, school leaders should seek additional funding to compensate teachers for working additional hours and/or to offer paid substitute teachers, so that classroom teachers can have additional planning time.

With these recommendations as guiding principles, I recommend that the elementary school should develop a parent advocacy program that is led by teachers and that includes content designed by parents. Through implementation of this program, parents would develop a sense of ownership that would motivate them to participate in program sessions. The curriculum for parents would cover important information, but more importantly, the program needs to encourage actionable items for parents to work on regarding school policy. The first step in this process would be to facilitate professional development for teachers that persuade them to take part in the project. When teachers are on board, teachers should then offer parents a survey to find out the kind of topics that should be included in the curriculum. In order to address the challenges faced by working parents, whenever parents come to the school for the program they should be offered meals and child care for their children. This requires funding and school leaders should allocate funding to cover these expenses and to compensate teachers and supporting staff. Finally, there needs to be an effort to collect data from parents via feedback slips after each session.

Limitations of the Study

The main limitation in this study is the scope that resulted from a reduced participant sample. While interviews provide many advantages to the quality of responses, interviews are time consuming, which limited the amount of families that were invited to participate. From the twenty-five families that were invited to participate, only six families accepted the invitation. These six families conform a diverse demographic group that is representative of other families in the first grade classroom, but not

representative of all the families in the school. This capstone should be taken as part of an initial effort to a larger project that aims to increase the voices and participation of parents of color in our schools. Additional research would need to be completed to address these limitations.

Recommendations for Further Research

One recommendation for further research is to design a mixed-methods research that includes quantitative tools that allow an increased sample size. Additionally, as it was mentioned before, developing a parent advocacy academy grounded in these results would benefit from a parent survey or questionnaire that allows teachers and principals to develop a curriculum that is truly designed by parents. Another suggestion would be to replicate the current study using comprehensive interview and/or questionnaire options in schools with different ethnic groups such as Native American and East African families. A study of this kind would allow the researcher to compare and contrast responses offered by diverse ethnic groups and to draw conclusions from the results. This study was conducted at an urban magnet school and a final suggestion would be to repeat this study at a traditional neighborhood district school.

This process is not only beneficial to the families. Developing close relationships with parents is helpful to teachers as well. Each one of the one-hour interviews revealed more information from the families than what I had been able to learn after a full school year of interacting with them. This realization prompted me to adjust my own practices for parent involvement where I resolved to develop closer relationships with my families earlier in the school year as we move forward.

Plan for Communicating and Using Resources

There are many benefits for both educators and researchers in spending more time learning about the families they serve. While I was working on this process, a colleague at work nominated me for a Minneapolis Educator Leadership Award (MELA) and in the spring, I was awarded a $5,000 grant prize to turn many components of my research into a reality. In the spring of 2016, I will launch a pilot parent advocacy academy that I have named *Parents for Excellence*. Teachers will lead this academy and the content will incorporate parent engagement opportunities that are relevant to parents of color as suggested by many of the authors in the literature review.

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Appendix A: Demographic Data

Guiding Questions

These questions will be asked during the interview in English or Spanish as applicable.

What is your age range? Circle one

- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-64 years old
- 65-74 years old
- 75 years or older

What is your ethnicity?

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Other _____

Please choose one:

- Where you born in Minnesota?
- Where you born in another state? If yes, please list _____.
- Where you born in a different country? If yes, please list _____.

What is your level of education? Circle one

- No schooling completed
- Nursery school to 8th grade
- Some high school, no diploma
- High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college credit, no degree
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Associate degree

- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Professional degree
- Doctorate degree

Professional or Employment Status

Are you currently…?
- Employed for wages
- Self-employed
- Out of work and looking for work
- Out of work but not currently looking for work
- A homemaker
- A student
- Military
- Retired
- Unable to work

Household Composition

Marital Status: What is your marital status?

- Single, never married
- Married or domestic partnership
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated

Does your child qualify for free or reduced-price lunch?

Appendix B: Interview Tool - Parents

Guiding Questions

1. Please share. What are your hopes and dreams for your child? – How can the school or I help you and your child to reach those goals?
2. Do you feel that you have the resources and knowledge to help your child achieve this goal? Please explain.
3. Please share. Do you think all children can succeed in the United States despite of their race or income? Explain your answer.
4. Please share. What do you know about the Common Core and standardized testing?
5. Do you think all children should go to college? Do you want your child to go to college?
5a. Please share the educational path that your child will follow. What does this path look like?
6. If you plan for your child to go to college, have you thought about how you or your family would pay for it? Please explain.
7. What do you know about scholarships and fellowships?
8. What do you know about extracurricular activities? Do you think they are important? Please explain.
9. What do you think colleges look at when considering a student for admission? Examples (activities, attendance, letters from teachers, transcript/grades, essay from student, standardized scores, and so on.) Ask parents to rank them in level of importance.
10. What kind of questions do you ask your child's teacher during conferences?
11. What kind of power do you feel you can have in influencing education in your district?
12. How do you feel about helping your child with schoolwork?
12a. Do you think you have the resources to help your child at home?
13. What is your preferred way to be engaged in the school?
14. How can your child's teacher help you?
15. What do you need from your child's teacher?
16. What is your availability to attend school meetings?
17. Do you think it can be useful to have your child's teacher as support during parent training? Why or why not?

18a. What are the pros and cons of having a teacher lead a parent academy?
18b. Does it matter to you if the academy is taught by an organization outside the school, a parent liaison or a teacher you know?

Appendix C: Questionnaire Tool – Teachers

Dear Colleague,

As teachers in an urban setting we are very aware of the education disparities that negatively affect children of color. Research asserts that effective parent involvement has a positive effect in students' educational outcomes, but research suggests that current models for parent involvement are not culturally relevant to the families and students we serve.

What do you think may be the pros and cons of having a teacher lead a parent academy to educate parents about the education system in an effort to eliminate education inequity?

Pros:

Cons: