Special issues in engaging and collaborating with families of English language learners

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SPECIAL ISSUES IN ENGAGING AND COLLABORATING WITH FAMILIES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Specialist in Education

Stephanie Allison Strouse

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July 2012
ABSTRACT

Research demonstrates positive outcomes associated with family involvement (FI), but little exists specific to English Language Learners' (ELLs) FI. Factors impacting FI are identified, but it is unclear which educators view as most significant and what practices are implemented to address them. This study utilized survey data to examine educators' attitudes within an Iowa Area Education Agency regarding FI of ELLs, current practices, perceptions of practices' effectiveness, and professional development (PD) related to ELLs. Participants reported positive relationships with families of ELLs and that ELL families value education, yet only moderate satisfaction with ELL FI. Results indicate incongruity between common and effective practices and low implementation of research-based practices, yet high levels of PD participation and interest related to ELLs.
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has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Specialist in Education

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Research over the last 15 years has made it quite clear that parental involvement is correlated with various positive outcomes for students academically, behaviorally, and even socially. Academic benefits include higher grade-point averages (e.g., Gutman & Midgley, 2000), as well as improved reading (e.g., Senechal & LeFevre, 2002), writing (e.g., Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997), and mathematics achievement (e.g., Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999), fewer special education placements (e.g., Miedel & Reynolds, 1999), and lower dropout incidence (e.g., Rumberger, 1995). Behaviorally and socially speaking, parental involvement is associated with greater incidence of self-regulatory behaviors (e.g., Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999) and better social skills (e.g., McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004).

Some studies have found causal relationships between parental involvement and student achievement (e.g., Shaver & Walls, 1998) and student behaviors (e.g., Kratochwill, McDonald, Levin, Bear-Tibbetts, & Demaray, 2004; Pantin et al., 2003). Esler, Godber, and Christenson (2002) summarize these positive outcomes well when stating, “It has grown increasingly apparent that the more families and schools are able to collaborate, the more likely benefits are noticed for not only students, but also their families and schools” (p. 390). Therefore, the primary goal of home-school collaboration and parental involvement is to support student learning and development across various domains such as home, school, and the community (Esler et al.).

Statement of the Problem

Parental involvement in their children’s education has been identified as a protective factor and important concern regardless of parental characteristics such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), language spoken, or geographic location (Anderson & Minke, 2007). However, certain populations’ involvement rates have been described as particularly low, specifically involvement rates of parents of English Language Learners (ELLs: De Gaetano, 2007). Also, significant increases in the proportion of ethnically diverse individuals in the U.S. population is widely recognized, with the 2000 U.S. Census data indicating that 37.3% of the U.S. population is from culturally diverse backgrounds (U.S. Census Bureau,
2006). Additionally, the ELL population was estimated to be 3.7 million, or 8 percent of the public school population, in 1999-2000 and has seen considerable growth since that time (Kindler, 2002).

Projecting beyond current demographics, the US Bureau of the Census (1996) predicts that Hispanic and Asian groups, both of which typically have large numbers of ELLs, will comprise nearly 25 percent of the US population by the year 2025 and no individual group will be the majority. Furthermore, by the year 2050, it is estimated that Hispanics alone will make up nearly one-fourth of the population, and although this will have the most impact on large cities and border states, rural areas are and will continue to be significantly affected (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Already, it is estimated that one out of every six children in the U.S. lives in an immigrant-headed family, with the majority of these immigrant families being non-English speakers (Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005).

**Significance of the Problem**

Given the demonstrated importance of parental involvement and the population trends indicating a rapidly increasing number of minorities and ELLs, educators working with culturally and linguistically diverse children must improve their cultural competence and develop multi-component strategies for increasing the engagement and collaboration efforts with families, particularly families of ELLs (Esler et al., 2002; Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002). However, cultural competence and strategies for engaging or collaborating with families, particularly ELL families are not one-size-fits-all skills that can be checked off a list, nor are they easily fixed by a panacea. Rather, these are complex issues that require integrating an array of knowledge and data-gathering with respect, flexibility, self-awareness, perspective-taking, understanding, and sensitivity (Anderson & Minke, 2007; De Gaetano, 2007; Ochoa & Rhodes, 2005; Olmedo, 2003; Ortiz & Flanagan; Pérez Carreón et al., 2005; Ramirez, 2003).

If educators are expected to effectively respond to these complex issues and meet the diverse needs of students and families, it is important to understand their current attitudes and beliefs regarding ELLs, be aware of their previous professional development related to serving ELLs, and to listen to their perspectives and desires regarding future professional development offerings, which may serve to improve educator practices. Educator attitudes and beliefs may impact their motivation to engage with ELL students and families and their likelihood to participate in ongoing professional development related to ELLs.
Additionally, it is important to better understand what practices educators are currently implementing to attempt to increase family involvement of ELLs and how effective they believe these practices are. Without listening to educators’ perspectives, the gap between research and practice may only widen and alienate educators trying to address the many issues facing families of ELLs.

Considering the complex nature of collaborating with families of ELLs, a wide range of issues must be taken into account. Various models (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995) attempting to address the many issues surrounding parental involvement include what are referred to as status variables (those which represent primarily unalterable characteristics or demographics such as ethnicity), as well as process variables (those which are more developmental in nature such as attitudes or parent-teacher relationships) (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, as well as Waanders, Mendez, and Downer (2007), argue that status variables generally play a role, but are not the principal causal factor in determining the level of parental involvement. Instead, process variables such as efficacy or economic stress are primarily responsible for the differences observed in parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler; Waanders et al.). Factors likely to impact ELL families in particular include, but are not limited to: varying definitions and contexts of family involvement, linguistic challenges, cultural differences, parent and teacher attitudes, knowledge of the U.S. educational system, networking opportunities, and economic issues. Each of these issues will be briefly discussed.

**Definition of Terms**

**Parental Involvement**

Even the common label of parental involvement can be misleading and alienate important individuals such as grandparents, extended family, or others who are available to students and educators for vital support and partnership. The focus exclusively on parents rather than including others’ involvement may portray a White American cultural attitude that parents are solely responsible for being involved in children’s education (Desimone, 1999). Research has shown that overall, parents are more involved in children’s education than others, however others are more involved in Latino children’s education than in non-Latino White children’s education (Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls, & Nero, 2010). This finding was not dependent on parents’ ethnicity, but rather was dependent on cultural orientation (Ryan et al.). Of
course, this has significant implications for ELLs who, as a group, have a wide range of cultural orientations including varying patterns of family involvement.

Given the impact of culturally-dependent roles of individuals’ involvement in children’s education, this paper and following study focus on family involvement, intended to include any and all significant individuals in the child’s life. However, much of the existing research focuses exclusively on parental involvement. For this reason, the term parental involvement is used throughout the literature review portion of this paper to most accurately reflect the subjects of the research being reviewed, despite the need for a more inclusive label and definition of involvement. The study following the literature review will use the more inclusive term family involvement to more accurately reflect various significant others’ contributions to children’s education.

English Language Learner Population

ELLs are a subgroup of linguistically and culturally diverse students. Any student who has had exposure to a different culture or a language other than English could be considered linguistically or culturally diverse; however they may not be defined as an ELL or Limited English Proficient (LEP; Gottlieb, 2006). According to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), LEP students are defined as:

(a) being 3 to 21 years of age, (b) enrolled or preparing to enroll in elementary or secondary school, (c) either not born in the United States or speaking a language other than English, and (d) owing to difficulty in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English, not meeting the state’s proficient level of achievement to successfully achieve in English-only classrooms. (2002)

This federal definition is then interpreted by each state (Abedi, 2004).

The Iowa legal definition of a limited English proficient student is a student whose:

language background is in a language other than English, and the student's proficiency in English is such that the probability of the student's academic success in an English-only classroom is below that of an academically successful peer with an English language background. (Iowa Code § 280.4)

However, the term English Language Learner is considered to be more respectful than Limited English Proficient (Grossman, 2006) and the Iowa Department of Education uses the term English Language Learner rather than Limited English Proficient (2010).

Beyond the legal definition of ELLs, it is important to recognize that ELLs come to school with an extremely diverse range of educational, cultural, linguistic, economic, and life experiences. Some ELLs
enter the American educational system with strong formal educational foundations, established literacy in another language, and may even be above grade level expectations academically. Others have had no formal schooling and may not be able to read or write in their native language or they may have interrupted formal schooling due to seasonal migration or other factors (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2008). ELLs come from many different cultures and have adopted cultural attitudes common in the United States to varying degrees.

Almost 80 percent of ELLs speak Spanish, however some districts have ELLs representing over 100 different language groups (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Education Programs, 2007). Even within the group of ELLs who speak Spanish as their first language, there is a great deal of diversity and therefore complexity in the terms used to identify groups of people. Primarily due to the use of the term by the U.S. Census Bureau and the media, the term Hispanic is frequently used to describe individuals from many different countries of origin such as Latin American countries, Portugal, Spain, others which have a historical relationship to Spain, or to describe individuals who speak Spanish (Calderon, 1992). However, the term Latino is often preferred by individuals from Latin American countries, or better yet, they may prefer to be identified by their specific country of origin (Calderon; Yehiel & Grey, 2005). Nonetheless, many research studies still choose to use the term Hispanic. This study will also use the term Hispanic for consistency unless otherwise denoted when reviewing a specific piece of literature which used a different term. The term Hispanic is used in this study with the acknowledgement that such a term used to categorize groups of people with diverse backgrounds is inherently and fundamentally flawed.

Not only are ELLs from numerous different countries of origin, some ELLs were born in the United States but come from homes where another language is spoken. Others have immigrated to the United States due to family choice or economic reasons. Still others come as refugees, forced out of their home country due to war or persecution based on race, religion, nationality, or political reasons. Some ELLs may also be undocumented, which can affect their trust of the educational system, family stress, as well as socioeconomic status (Echevarría et al., 2008). It is twice as likely for immigrant children to come
from families with incomes in the lowest quartile (Schwartz, 1996), though some ELLs come from middle or upper class families.

Due to the incredible diversity within the ELL population, it is imperative that educators not make any assumptions about ELL students or families and that they invest the time and effort required to learn about the individuals they are working with. The immense variation among ELLs also poses challenges for researchers in that results obtained with a subset of the ELL population may not generalize to subsets of other cultures, languages, geographic locations, migrant populations, socioeconomic statuses, educational experiences, or in the context of various educational practices. Additional studies must be done to determine whether or not research findings, either with the general population or with different subgroups of ELLs, can be generalized to all ELLs and specifically if they should be applied to a particular context such as in an Iowa Area Education Agency (AEA).

**Rationale and Purpose**

Parental involvement and educators’ collaboration with parents improves academic outcomes for children. Process variables such as parent and teacher attitudes, efficacy, opportunities for involvement, knowledge about the educational system, and social networking most impact involvement. Research has also identified barriers to parental involvement and the need for educators to help overcome those barriers. With the projected increase in ELLs there is a growing need for educators to have access to professional development opportunities and other resources to increase their knowledge, skills, and abilities in relating to and involving parents, or more broadly families, of ELLs.

Repeated research has indicated that a broader and more culturally sensitive view of parental involvement is needed and should also include other individuals in children’s lives, encompassing all family involvement (Desimone, 1999; Ryan et al., 2010). Language, cultural factors, and perceptions of what qualifies as involvement and whose involvement is considered are all possible barriers impacting teachers’ effectiveness in collaborating with ELL families. Therefore, it is important to get educators’ perspectives on which barriers most impact their ability to increase family involvement, what they are doing to increase family involvement, and what resources or professional development they need.
A review of the literature has indicated a need to improve parental involvement and to expand the
definition to include other significant individuals. Factors impacting involvement have been identified,
however it is unclear what factors educators view as most significant and what practices are being
implemented to address them. The primary purpose of this study is to determine attitudes, practices, and the
perceived effectiveness of those practices regarding families of ELLs in an Iowa AEA. This information
can then be used to improve professional development and resources available for teachers, staff, and
administrators working with the ELL population. The ultimate goal of improved practices for increasing
family involvement would be an actual increase in family involvement, leading to increased achievement
for ELLs.

Organization of the Study

Following this introductory chapter, there are four more. The second chapter provides a review of
the literature. The third describes the methodology and results are reported in the fourth chapter. The
interpretation of the results and their implications for practice and future research are offered in the fifth
and final chapter.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of the related literature regarding parental involvement and the implications for families of ELLs. It consists of nine sections, with the first section providing a definition of parental involvement. The following sections provide an overview of several factors affecting parental involvement including: linguistic challenges, cultural differences, attitudes and opportunities, knowledge of the U.S. educational system, social networking opportunities, and economic issues. Then, the application of general findings to ELLs will be discussed. Finally, a brief overview of teachers’ attitudes, practices, and professional development related to cultural competence, diversity, and/or working with families of English Language Learners will be provided.

Definition of Parental Involvement

First, it is important to recognize that not everyone defines parental engagement, parental involvement, or home-school collaboration in the same manner. Parents may view their involvement primarily as their presence at home, keeping their children out of trouble, making sure they are attending school, or other community-centered behaviors (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Educators, on the other hand, may expect parental involvement to be demonstrated primarily at school functions and volunteer efforts (Anderson & Minke). Research also supports the importance of a third aspect of parental involvement: the parent-teacher relationship (Waanders et al., 2007).

Indeed, a lack of understanding or shared definition of what it means to be engaged in a student’s schooling may lead parents to feel unacknowledged and less likely to want to participate in school-based events. Meanwhile, it may lead teachers to incorrectly fault parents whom they perceive to be uninvolved and therefore attribute a student’s challenging behaviors or lack of sufficient academic progress to parents who do not care about their child’s success (Lawson, 2003). In fact, research shows that parents’ reports of their involvement at home are relatively unrelated to other forms of parental involvement, for example, attendance at school events (Waanders et al., 2007). All types of parental involvement seem to be somewhat correlated, but a parent’s level of involvement in different contexts, such as at home versus in
school, are relatively independent. This is particularly true for families with inflexible work schedules (Waanders et al.).

Expanding upon the idea that parents, particularly immigrant parents, may have varying ideas about what it means to engage in their child’s education, Pérez Carreón et al. (2005) attempted to better understand Hispanic immigrant parents’ perceptions of school engagement through a three-year research project based on conversation groups, informal conversations, and observations. Three engagement orientations were summarized: “strategic helper: being in the classroom,” “questioner: changing the schooling experience for his son from the outside,” and “listener: using nontraditional formal spaces to learn how to engage with schools differently” (Pérez Carreón et al.). All three orientations viewed presence as essential, but their definition of presence did not always include formal engagement experiences or school-based activities as educators may expect. A wide variety of factors influenced the ways parents chose or were able to be involved with their child’s education in this study as well as in other studies. Six factors will be discussed in the following sections and include: linguistic challenges, cultural differences, attitudes and opportunities, knowledge of the U.S. educational system, social networking opportunities, and economic issues.

**Linguistic Challenges**

Perhaps the most easily identified issue in engaging and collaborating with parents of ELLs is limited English proficiency. Some researchers consider the language barrier to be one of the major obstacles for parental involvement (Wong & Hughes, 2006), whereas others acknowledge its importance but believe culture to be a more inclusive and defining obstacle for both parents and practitioners (Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002). Regardless of the level of relative importance of language barriers, one cannot deny their substantial impact on many of the other issues addressed in this paper including culture, attitudes, efficacy, ability to gather information or knowledge, and social networking.

For example, in a study conducted by Wong and Hughes (2006), Hispanic parents who spoke more Spanish than English reported a significantly lower level of shared responsibility with teachers for their child’s education as compared to Hispanic parents who spoke more English than Spanish. This variable alone accounted for the differences found between Hispanics and non-Hispanics in parent reported
shared responsibility with teachers. As discussed later, this may be due to parents' lack of familiarity with the American schooling system, low efficacy for helping with homework in the English language, or a myriad of other variables (Wong & Hughes).

Cultural Differences

Language serves not only as a method of communication, but for many individuals it is also a concrete representation of their nationality and cultural identity (Olmedo, 2003). One cannot minimize the importance of cultural identity regardless of the specific cultural identity. For this reason, educators' self-awareness is particularly important. School systems themselves are cultural in nature. Furthermore, predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon values are taught throughout the curriculum with little acknowledgement of different values or perspectives (Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002). Some research suggests that focusing on a family's culture in a positive manner increases their engagement in the child's schooling (De Gaetano, 2007). Therefore, appreciation of cultural diversity must be given much more than a surface level acknowledgement and looked upon as a strength which educators should strive to better understand. Cultural diversity must be something to be celebrated and built upon (De Gaetano).

Additionally, it is essential to recognize that ELLs are an extremely heterogeneous population and do not represent a single culture, but rather include an unlimited number of cultural norms, customs, attitudes, and life experiences. According to Kindler (2002), as a group, ELLs have over 400 different first languages, although the majority of ELL's first language is Spanish. Also, a distinction between language and culture must be made. Although the majority of ELLs speak Spanish, these individuals represent a wide variety of nationalities and cultures and even speak many different dialects of Spanish despite a common formal language classification (Ochoa & Rhodes, 2005; Yehieli & Grey, 2005).

Even within a particular culture there is a great deal of individual variation. Furthermore, individuals constantly change by gaining new knowledge and adopting multiple strategies depending on the challenges they are presented (Olmedo, 2003). Hispanics, and certainly ELLs, are a diverse group and most wish to be identified by their specific country of origin (Yehieli & Grey, 2005). It would be ideal for research to recognize the heterogeneity among these populations, yet unfortunately, often due to small sample size, all people of Hispanic origin are frequently lumped together into one category in research.
Clearly, due to the variety of countries of origin and cultural values, this may significantly confound results of such studies.

**Attitudes and Opportunities**

One factor related to culture that researchers believe has a significant impact on level of parental engagement is parental attitudes (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s model of parental involvement (1995), particularly relevant attitudes and beliefs include: attitudes about the parental role, parental efficacy, and perception of opportunity for involvement both at home and at school. Other researchers highlight the importance of parent-teacher relationships, teacher attitudes, and teachers’ awareness of parental involvement at home (De Gaetano, 2007). Nevertheless, each component of both parent and educator attitudes, as well as perceived and actual opportunities for involvement, is important and must be addressed with not only the general population, but also with ELLs. The following four components pertaining to attitudes and opportunities: parental attitudes toward education, parental attitudes toward their role, parental efficacy, as well as teacher attitudes, the parent-teacher relationship, and opportunities for involvement will be elaborated upon in the following sections.

**Parental Attitudes Toward Education**

Lower levels of parental involvement among ethnic minorities (including some, but not limited to ELLs) are often attributed to a perception that they place less value on education (López, 2001; Wong & Hughes, 2006). However, these perceptions are largely unfounded or based on the traditional, in-school definition of parental involvement previously discussed (De Gaetano, 2007; López; Wong & Hughes). Alternatively, research with minority parents, particularly African American and Hispanic individuals, has found a strong belief in the importance of involvement in their child’s education as well as interest in such roles if invited by the school or child (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Ramirez, 2003; Wong & Hughes). Despite ethnic minority and immigrant parents’ interest in their children’s education, the particular manifestations of that interest may vary depending on culture, parental education, values, life circumstances, and the individual (Anderson & Minke; Auerbach, 2007; Lawson, 2003; López, 2001; Pérez...
Carreón et al., 2005; Waanders et al., 2007). Unfortunately this leads to the misconception that some parents simply do not value their children’s education (Lawson; López; Pérez Carreón et al.).

The idea that immigrant parents may have a significant interest and investment in their children’s education, yet still not demonstrate that interest in traditional ways is elaborated upon by López (2001) in his qualitative study of the Padilla family. All five of the children in this immigrant family consistently earned honor roll recognition and graduated in the top 10% of their high school class; however, educators generally viewed the family to be “uninvolved” in the children’s education. López (Results section, para. 1), argues that the Padillas “understood involvement as something much broader than traditional academic interpretations. For the Padillas, involvement was seen as teaching their children to appreciate the value of their education through the medium of hard work.” López later describes how Mr. Padilla in particular gave his children experiences with his numerous jobs such as working in the fields and in the truck driving industry in order to show them the importance of education so that they would not have to work in similar laborious and low-paying positions. For him, this was the best way to show his interest in his children’s success and become involved in their education (López). This exemplifies a nontraditional approach to parental involvement that is likely to be overlooked by school personnel.

Parental Attitudes Toward Their Roles

Beyond parents’ attitudes toward education in general, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) suggest that parents’ belief that involvement in their children’s education is their responsibility increases the likelihood of their participation. This is also referred to as role construction and is hypothesized to develop largely from social influences such as modeling and observation of other parents, including one’s own parents (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler; Sheldon, 2002). It is an important prerequisite to parental involvement because it allows the parent to envision and proceed to involvement in a variety of activities related to their children’s education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler). Including educational involvement in one’s parental role construction also indicates parental responsibilities and behaviors related to the child’s education have been considered, making such action more likely (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler).
In a study with parents of elementary school children, Drummond and Stipek (2004) found that parents’ role construction impacts parental involvement. The study did include families with diverse backgrounds; 36% of the sample was African American, 16% was classified as Latino, 2% Asian, and 1% Native American. The rest of the sample was classified as Caucasian (41%; Drummond & Stipek). Somewhat surprisingly, Anderson and Minke (2007) also found role construction positively correlated with parental involvement, but to a much lesser extent than predicted. When other variables were taken into account, parental role construction had no direct impact on involvement behaviors in the home or school setting, however this was moderated by grade level (Anderson & Minke). Clearly, more research in this area is necessary in order to better interpret previous findings.

Furthermore, according to Wong and Hughes (2006), Hispanic parents report a “low sense of shared responsibility for their children’s education” (p. 657). However, very little research in this area has been performed with ELLs as participants and it is unknown what similarities or differences may be found with such a population. Despite a dearth of studies with ELLs, research with the general population supports the idea that parents’ role construction influences involvement in their children’s education. Nonetheless, parents’ acceptance of educational involvement as part of their role is not adequate to ensure their involvement. As will be discussed, other factors, such as whether or not parents believe they are capable of performing in this role is another important component (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

Parental Efficacy

Another variable that researchers have identified as key in accounting for some of the variance observed in levels of parental engagement is parental efficacy (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Waanders et al., 2007). Parental efficacy is defined as “a person’s belief in his or her own competence to achieve a desired parenting outcome” (Waanders et al., p. 622). According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, parental efficacy is derived from four different sources. The most powerful source is first-hand experiences of success in other activities related to involvement. The experiences may be either as a parent, or as a child who benefited from parental involvement he or she perceived to be helpful. The second-most powerful source is learning of other parents’ successful experiences. Additional sources of efficacy include being convinced by others that the parent is capable of
engaging in involvement activities which are valuable, and finally, the emotional provocation that occurs when critical issues such as the parent’s or child’s success are at stake (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler).

Efficacy also encompasses feeling confident in one’s ability to find additional information or resources (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler).

Efficacy is thought to be important because it allows the parent to take action believing that he or she can make a difference in his or her child’s education. Furthermore, parents with a high level of efficacy are better able to persist, even when confronted with challenges in helping their child succeed (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Additionally, the same sources of self-efficacy that were discussed for parents are implicated in developing self-efficacy for the student in terms of ability to succeed in school and therefore serve a dual purpose (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler). However, Green et al. (2007) found an interesting caveat related to the predictive value that self-efficacy has in regards to parental involvement: self-efficacy predicts parental involvement in the home environment but is a small, yet negative predictor of school-based involvement. One potential explanation is that parents with low self-efficacy view school personnel as experts and turn to them for support (Green et al.).

Teacher Attitudes, the Parent-Teacher Relationship, and Opportunities for Involvement

Perhaps the most interesting and useful findings related to parental involvement and home-school collaboration is that teacher attitudes, quality of parent-teacher relationships, and invitations to parents have had the strongest relationship with parental involvement in some studies regardless of other variables (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Ramirez, 2003; Waanders et al., 2007). This is encouraging because teacher attitudes, parent-teacher relationships, and invitations to parents are more easily controlled by educators than other variables that have been implicated in accounting for differences in parental involvement such as SES, ethnicity, or linguistic challenges. As Esler et al. (2002) point out, school personnel can improve collaboration with parents through their attitudes, relationships, and actions.

One action educators can take that has received considerable attention from researchers is inviting parents to get involved. This may be in the form of general school invitations, specific teacher invitations, or specific child invitations (Green et al., 2007). General invitations may include an inviting atmosphere, teacher greetings, flyers seeking parental involvement, or the child’s general desire for parents to be
involved and his or her enthusiasm in discussing school with his or her parents (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Examples of specific teacher invitations include a teacher directly asking a parent to attend a specified event or to engage in a particular behavior. This is particularly helpful because it implies that the teacher values the parent’s contribution (Green et al.; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler). Also, a child asking a parent for help with a particular homework assignment or inviting them to school for a particular event can be a powerful impetus for parental involvement. Parents generally want their children to be successful and typically respond to the child’s expressed needs (Green et al.; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler).

Positive teacher attitudes, positive parent-teacher relationships, and invitations for involvement all increase the likelihood of parental involvement (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Additionally, these variables may increase parents’ self-efficacy via verbal persuasion that their involvement is valuable. More positive parent-teacher relationships and increased opportunities for involvement may also help parents gain knowledge about their child’s education (Anderson & Minke; Green et al.; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler). Involvement of parents of ELLs may increase if they are more aware of the U.S. educational system. Accordingly, this topic will be elaborated upon next.

Knowledge of U.S. Educational System

Due to the fact that most ELL students are from immigrant families, many do not understand how schools in the US operate or are not informed about the various types of educational programs available for their children (Ochoa & Rhodes, 2005). Many are unaware of the various programs that may be offered such as English-only programs, bilingual programs, pull-out English as a second language (ESL) programs, maintenance programs, or other programming offered for ELLs. Furthermore, even if they are aware of a listing of programs available, they frequently do not understand what each involves or the potential ramifications of each (Ochoa & Rhodes).

Beyond specific programs for ELLs, many immigrant parents may not have knowledge about how school systems operate in the US in general. For example, Pérez Carreón (2005) gives the example of Isabel, a recent immigrant mother with “virtually no knowledge of how schools worked in the United States.” (p. 492). These challenges are often further complicated by linguistic and cultural challenges.
previously discussed (Pérez Carreón; Wong & Hughes, 2006) and a lack of social networks in the US from which to gather information (Sheldon, 2002).

Social Networking Opportunities

Parents' attitudes, as well as their knowledge about the U.S. educational system may be influenced by their social networks. In fact, social networks have been described as “channels of communication that help people identify the human and material resources they need, as well as share and carry information or attitudes” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In addition to transmitting attitudes or knowledge, perhaps about the U.S. educational system, social networks are more simplistically defined as relationships and connections an individual has with other people and may provide emotional and practical support (Sheldon, 2002).

The exact manner in which social networks influence parental attitudes, knowledge, or parental involvement in general is largely unknown. However, it is suggested that parental relationships and networks may have an impact on parents’ involvement in their children’s education (Sheldon, 2002). For example, some studies have found that parents with more informal connections to other parents (networks) were more knowledgeable about school policies and procedures than parents with fewer connections (e.g. Useem, 1992).

Although there is a paucity of research regarding the role of parents' social networks in parental involvement, Sheldon (2002) found that the number of parental ties to other parents with children at the same school was predictive of self-reported levels of parental involvement both at home and at school, even after accounting for parental beliefs. In other words, social “capital” is an important variable to examine in regards to factors influencing parental involvement. However, these results must be interpreted carefully due to the cross-sectional nature of the study. Indeed, it is quite possible that parents who are more involved in their children’s education also have more opportunities for social networking rather than the higher levels of social networking producing an increase in parental involvement.

Additionally, because of the self-report nature, it is also possible that parents with a larger social network were more susceptible to responding in a socially desirable manner. Furthermore, a majority of participants in Sheldon’s (2002) study were Caucasian and all spoke English as a first language, therefore findings may not be generalizable to minority or ELL populations. Regardless, social networks may have a
significant effect on parental involvement and should be studied further with ELLs and other populations (Sheldon). In addition to a lack of social networks, some ELL parents also face economic difficulties.

**Economic Issues**

Many ELL families experience poverty and difficulty finding jobs that pay enough to support the family (Pérez Carreón et al., 2005). Ramirez (2003) argues that because parents who are unable to attend school events are frequently seen as uncaring, “by implication, parents of low socioeconomic standing are unable to attend school functions because they simply do not desire to be a part of their children’s education”. Understandably so, parents may be offended when educators adopt such an attitude. As previously discussed, most parents want to play an active role in their child’s education (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Ramirez, 2003; Wong & Hughes) and dismissing parents with economic challenges as uncaring is not only unfounded, but also lead to little improvement in relationships or involvement rates (Lawson, 2003; Orozco, 2008).

The relationship between SES and parental involvement is certainly a controversial one and is not limited to ELLs. Researchers have examined SES as a key variable in numerous studies investigating factors influencing parental involvement and such studies have produced mixed results. Some studies have suggested that SES and parental involvement are indeed significantly correlated (Fan & Chen, 2001). However, others have indicated that SES does not directly account for the inconsistency of parental involvement rates found among SES groups (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

Additionally, low SES parents are more likely than higher SES parents to conceptualize teachers and other educators as experts (Waanders et al., 2007). This may negatively affect parent involvement rates in their children’s education and provides another example of the importance of process variables rather than status variables (Waanders et al.). A number of other researchers have argued that status variables, such as SES, are not as important as processes that motivate or alter parents’ involvement, such as many of the factors previously discussed in this paper (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler; Waanders et al., 2007). These include varying definitions and contexts of parental engagement, cultural differences, parent and teacher attitudes, invitations or perceived opportunities for engagement, knowledge of the U.S. educational system, and social networking opportunities.
Application of General Findings to ELLs

Despite the relative wealth of information gathered by researchers about variables that affect parental involvement in children's education in general, little remains known about this topic that is specific to ELL populations. In fact, as Auerbach (2007) points out, the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model (1995) seems to "operationalize high involvement in terms of conventional middle-class norms, such as parents providing direct instruction or reinforcing school-related behaviors—behaviors that may not be feasible for parents with limited formal education or English fluency" (p. 255). For this reason, one must be extremely careful when applying findings from any research carried out with the general population to ELLs. Therefore, the next section briefly discusses research findings regarding the professional development educators receive that is specific to culturally and linguistically diverse students and families, as well as research regarding teacher attitudes toward ELLs.

Professional Development and Teacher Attitudes

Teacher preparation and ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers vary greatly according to the specific teacher preparation program, state, and district. However, the current national literature indicates that even though teacher preparation programs for future ELL or bilingual education teachers require classes regarding cultural and linguistic diversity, many teacher preparation programs for general education teachers do not require specific coursework related to culturally and linguistically diverse students and families (deJong & Harper, 2005). In fact, fewer than one in six institutes of higher education made any preparation regarding ELLs mandatory for mainstream teachers (deJong & Harper). Those that do require such coursework often do so through a cursory overview and research indicates that multicultural education coursework has not significantly impacted teachers' instructional practices (Davis Lesski, Crumpler, Stallworth, & Crawford, 2005). Nationally speaking, ongoing professional development specifically related to ELLs does not appear to be sufficient, with one national survey indicating that 42% of the teachers surveyed had ELLs in their classroom, but a mere 12.5% of those teachers had participated in more than eight hours of professional development that was specific to ELLs (deJong & Harper).

Not only does research unveil many teachers' limited professional development specific to ELLs, some researchers also argue that professional development related to parent and family involvement is
inadequate. If teachers do have professional development experiences related to family involvement, it is often based on a traditional parent involvement paradigm, which can isolate many families due to differing patterns of relating and interacting which do not align to the traditional school culture (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). One of the most powerful factors impacting inclusive family involvement practices is teacher beliefs, which can vary drastically by individual and school culture (Souto-Manning & Swick). One study performed in a Midwestern suburban district revealed mixed teacher attitudes toward ELLs, with only 43 percent indicating they would like to have ELL students in their classroom (Karabenick & Clemens Noda, 2004). Clearly the quantity and quality of professional development related to both ELLs and family involvement is of concern and worth future investigation and improvement, which may in turn also help to better understand and perhaps transform teacher attitudes.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, due to a scarcity of research about parental involvement specific to ELLs, practitioners are often forced to incorporate what is known about parental engagement and home-school collaboration in general, with what researchers have found regarding special issues in engaging and collaborating with parents of ELLs. Certainly further research is needed in this area. However, findings from general research and research specific to ELLs can inform school psychologists' and other educators' practices regarding the important issues of parental engagement and home-school collaboration.

The first implication of research regarding parental engagement and home-school collaboration is simple: parental involvement and educators' collaboration with parents is essential to children's success. Numerous studies have demonstrated the relationship between parental involvement and student's academic achievement (e.g., Epstein et al., 1997; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Izzo et al., 1999; Senchel & LeFevre, 2002), lower dropout rates (e.g., Rumberger, 1995), and better social and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Brody et al., 1999; McWayne et al., 2004). Some studies even indicate a causal relationship among these variables (e.g., Shaver & Walls, 1998). Without a doubt, educators should be very concerned with parental involvement and collaboration.

A second and extremely important implication for school psychologists and other educators is that the conceptualization of parental involvement should be expanded to include nontraditional methods of
engagement and involvement whether it is in the home, in the community, or at school (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Parental engagement in various arenas is somewhat interrelated, but an individual parent’s level of involvement at home versus in school are relatively independent, particularly if that parent has a job with an inflexible schedule (Waanders et al.). Therefore it is important not to judge parents’ involvement based solely on their participation in school-based activities. This is not only inaccurate, but may lead to alienation and decreased future engagement (Lawson, 2003). Instead, practitioners must make every effort to understand the family’s circumstances, culture, and methods of involvement that are practical for the individuals. Additionally, barriers that ELL families face such as limited proficiency in English, acclimation to a new cultural world, and socioeconomic factors should also be taken into account when evaluating or attempting to increase parental engagement.

Finally, practitioners should acknowledge and seek to influence the process variables discussed in this paper such as parental attitudes, efficacy, opportunities, access to information about the educational system, and social networking rather than stereotyping individuals based on status variables such as ethnicity or SES. Process variables not only are primarily responsible for the differences observed in parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Waanders et al., 2007), they are also more amenable to change. Therefore, school psychologists and educators who seek to improve the involvement of parents of ELLs must start by improving communication and cultural understanding between themselves and parents of ELLs. Then, they must build upon that communication and understanding to increase parents’ inclusion of educational involvement into their role construction, improve parental self-efficacy, increase opportunities for involvement, expand parents’ knowledge of the U.S. educational system, and help build parents’ social networks. Each of these improvements is likely to then enhance parental involvement and increase home-school collaboration.

Based on the literature review, this study aims to determine the current practices educators implement to increase family involvement of ELLs and to gain a better understanding of the challenges educators face in doing so. Educators’ perceived effectiveness, previous professional development, and desire for further professional development will also be examined. The methodology used in this study is described in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3
METHODS

Research has shown that positive parent-teacher relationships, information provided in the families' first language, knowledge about the educational system, social networking opportunities, specific invitations for involvement, and assistance with other barriers may increase parental involvement. The primary purpose of this study was to determine the current practices educators implement to increase family involvement of ELLs and to determine which practices educators perceive to be most effective. This research study developed and utilized survey data to examine educators' attitudes regarding family involvement of ELLs, educators' current practices related to increasing family involvement, educators' level of education and professional development experience related to cultural competence, diversity, and/or working with families of ELLs, as well as educators' perceptions of the practices' effectiveness.

Participants

Participants included educators who serve at least one ELL student within districts served by the AEA. They were also members of an e-mail list-serve maintained by the AEA's ELL Consultant which included the educators within the AEA working with ELL students. Possible respondents served as ELL teachers, general education teachers, special education teachers, AEA staff members, administrators, and various support staff. 106 individuals were included in the list-serve.

Site

The site chosen for this study is an Iowa AEA that serves over 30 public school districts, over 20 approved nonpublic schools, and more than 10 non-approved private schools. More than 71,000 students, 5,800 school staff members, and 250 school administrators are served by the AEA. According to data kept by the AEA, there were 1,297 ELL students within the AEA during the 2010-2011 school year and 21,733 ELL students in the state of Iowa. Of the 1,297 ELL students in the AEA, 70 languages were represented, with approximately 49 percent speaking Spanish. The site was chosen due to its location and the researcher's affiliation with the agency, in hopes of utilizing the data to inform professional development and resources offered and to work with educators in improving practice and outcomes for the ELLs served.
by the agency. The researcher obtained consent from the AEA to conduct the research and utilize the list-serve maintained by the AEA’s ELL Coordinator (see Appendix A).

Survey

In order to develop the survey utilized in this study, the researcher reviewed the professional literature concerning the factors that impact family involvement of ELLs. The literature review led to identifying the following factors: teacher attitudes, professional development, initiating various types of invitations, providing information in the family’s native language, providing opportunities to learn about the educational system, providing opportunities for social networking, providing opportunities to learn or practice English, providing assistance for physical needs or economic difficulties, offering opportunities for involvement outside of traditional hours, encouraging family choice in the type of involvement they have, and providing opportunities to learn skills and strategies for helping their children with academics. The researcher then developed survey questions to address these factors.

After a rough draft of the survey was developed, the researcher requested feedback from the AEA’s ELL Team. The team is comprised of eleven AEA staff members who have backgrounds in serving ELL students and a common interest in providing resources and professional development to other AEA staff members, teachers, ELL families, and other educational stakeholders. Members include school psychologists, speech language pathologists, curriculum consultants, and school social workers. The team had an open discussion regarding the survey and developed additional questions that the team thought would assist in planning future resource and professional development offerings. These additions included asking about the educators’ biggest challenges and collecting data on educators’ professional development experiences and desires.

The final version of the survey contains a total of 36 questions. Of the 36 questions, 2 are basic demographic questions, 5 are regarding the educator’s beliefs and attitudes, 12 are regarding the educator’s current practices, 12 are regarding the educator’s perceived effectiveness of those practices, 3 are regarding professional development, 1 is regarding the educator’s perceived biggest challenge, and 1 is an open-ended question soliciting further comments. The survey takes an estimated 5-10 minutes to complete and requires access to a computer and the internet. A complete copy of the survey can be seen in Appendix B.
Procedure

After obtaining approval from the AEA and the Institutional Review Board, participants were sent a link to complete the survey electronically using Zoomerang through a list-serve from the agency's ELL Team coordinator. The ELL Team coordinator sent the email to participants in an effort to increase the response rate. Individuals on the list-serve had received emails from the ELL Team coordinator previously and perhaps were more likely to recognize the sender and respond than if the email had come from the researcher's unknown email address. The body of the email contained the participant consent letter (see Appendix C), including the link to the survey. A reminder email with the survey link was sent one week after the initial email (see Appendix D) and the survey was closed to respondents an additional week later. There were 106 individuals on the list-serve. Only indirect identifiers of gender and role were kept, no directly personally identifying information was available to the researcher. Participants were informed that the survey was anonymous and that the data collected would be used to research family involvement of English Language Learners and help to inform professional development opportunities available to them.

Once the survey was closed, the data obtained was organized and entered into the data analysis software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Means and standard deviations were calculated for each survey item that yielded scaled responses. Percentages of the frequencies of each response were calculated for items that yielded nominal responses. A Participant Belief Scale was created by summing each participant's ratings on survey items 3 through 7 and a Current Practices Scale was created by summing each participant's ratings on the first portion of items 8 through 19. These two scales were then correlated using the Pearson correlation. The findings gathered following these procedures are reported in the next chapter.
The primary goal at the outset of this study was to determine educators' beliefs, practices, and the perceived effectiveness of those practices regarding families of ELLs within the borders of an Iowa AEA. Within the AEA, a list-serve which included 106 individuals was utilized to gather survey responses. Of the 106 individuals on the list-serve, 35 completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 33 percent. Results indicate that of the 35 respondents, 31 (89%) were females and 4 (11%) were males. Most respondents were ELL teachers with 16 (46%), followed by 5 administrators (14%), 4 school psychologists (11%), 4 other AEA staff members (11%), 2 general education teachers (6%), 2 special education teachers (6%), one speech language pathologist (3%), 1 counselor (3%), and 1 ELL coordinator (3%). The results of the study in regards to participants' beliefs, participants' current practices and their perceived effectiveness, participants' biggest challenge in collaborating with families of ELLs, participants' professional development participation and awareness, and participants' desire for future professional development will be detailed in this chapter. A discussion of the results, including the implications and limitations of the findings follow in the next and final chapter.

Participant Beliefs

Survey items 3 through 7 address participant beliefs regarding family involvement and ELLs. The complete items, mean scores, and standard deviations for these items can be found in Table 1. Each of these items regarding participant beliefs is based on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 4 “strongly agree.” As the table demonstrates, participants overwhelmingly believed family involvement to be related to positive educational outcomes, with a mean score of 3.85. Generally, satisfaction with the level of family involvement of ELLs appeared somewhat neutral, with a mean score of 2.41, indicating the average response was somewhere between “disagree” and “agree.” However, overall, participants did believe that families of ELLs value education with a mean of 3.68. Participants indicated a mixed response in regards to the families of ELLs viewing them as the expert and being hesitant to get involved, with a mean of 2.68. Nevertheless, participants largely felt they have a positive relationship with the families of ELLs, with a mean of 3.43.
Table 1

Participant Beliefs (Items 3-7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean Score (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family involvement is related to positive educational outcomes for students.</td>
<td>3.85 (0.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the level of family involvement of my ELLs.</td>
<td>2.41 (0.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families of ELLs value education.</td>
<td>3.68 (0.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families of ELLs view me as the expert and are hesitant to get involved or share their perspective.</td>
<td>2.68 (0.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a positive relationship with the families of my ELL students</td>
<td>3.43 (0.56)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Current Practices and Perceived Effectiveness

Survey items 8 through 19 address participants’ current practices regarding encouraging family involvement of ELLs. Survey items 8b through 19b address participants’ perceived effectiveness of each respective practice. The abbreviated survey items, mean scores, and standard deviations for these items can be found in Table 2. See Appendix B for the complete items as presented in the survey. Items regarding current practices are based on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 4 “strongly agree.” Items regarding the perceived effectiveness of practices are based on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 “not at all effective” to 5 “extremely effective.”

The most common practices that participants reported implementing include: general invitations (3.31), opportunities to learn about the school/district (3.03), providing written information in the family’s native language (2.94), opportunities to learn about ELL programming (2.77), and providing resources for economic difficulties (2.74). The least common practices that participants reported implementing include: modeling of skills to help their child with homework or learning academic skills (2.09), opportunities to learn English (2.14), opportunities for social networking (2.46), specific invitations (2.46), and family choice in involvement activities (2.54). If participants “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they had
implemented a specific practice, they were then asked how effective they perceived that practice to be. The practices perceived to be most effective were: opportunities for social networking (3.79), modeling of skills to help their child with homework or learning academic skills (3.40), opportunities outside of traditional hours (3.29), opportunities to learn about ELL programming (3.20), and family choice in involvement activities (3.15). The practices perceived to be the least effective were: opportunities to learn English (2.70), specific invitations (2.88), opportunities to learn about the school/district (2.90), general invitations (2.91), and providing resources for economic difficulties (3.05).

Table 2

*Current Practices and Perceived Effectiveness* (Items 8-19, 8b-19b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Current Practice</th>
<th>Perceived Effectiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Based on a 4-point scale</td>
<td>Based on a 5-point scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean Score (SD) n</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean Score (SD) n</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General invitations</td>
<td>3.31 (0.58) n = 35</td>
<td>2.91 (0.82) n = 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific invitations</td>
<td>2.46 (0.78) n = 35</td>
<td>2.88 (1.03) n = 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child invitations</td>
<td>2.69 (0.68) n = 35</td>
<td>3.10 (1.02) n = 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written information in native language</td>
<td>2.94 (0.73) n = 35</td>
<td>3.07 (0.96) n = 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to learn about school/district</td>
<td>3.03 (0.71) n = 35</td>
<td>2.90 (0.94) n = 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to learn about ELL programming</td>
<td>2.77 (0.73) n = 35</td>
<td>3.20 (0.87) n = 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for social networking</td>
<td>2.46 (0.92) n = 35</td>
<td>3.79 (0.89) n = 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to learn English</td>
<td>2.14 (0.88) n = 35</td>
<td>2.70 (0.68) n = 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources for economic difficulties</td>
<td>2.74 (0.82) n = 35</td>
<td>3.05 (1.05) n = 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities outside of traditional hours</td>
<td>2.69 (0.80) n = 35</td>
<td>3.29 (1.10) n = 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family choice in activities</td>
<td>2.54 (0.66) n = 35</td>
<td>3.15 (0.88) n = 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling of skills</td>
<td>2.09 (0.70) n = 35</td>
<td>3.40 (0.97) n = 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Beliefs and Current Practices

In order to examine the possible relationship between participants' beliefs and participants' current practices, a Participant Belief Scale and a Current Practices Scale were created and correlated using the Pearson correlation. The Participant Belief Scale was created by summing each participant’s ratings on survey items 3 through 7. The Current Practices Scale was created by summing each participant’s ratings on the first portion of survey items 8 through 19. The analysis examined the relationship between participants' beliefs and participants' current practices for \( n = 33 \) participants. The two scales yielded a weak positive correlation of \( r = 0.45 \) and the correlation was significant at the 0.01 level using a two-tailed test. The coefficient of determination was \( r^2 = 0.20 \), indicating that 20 percent of the variability in participants' current practices can be predicted from the relationship with participant beliefs.

Biggest Challenge in Collaborating with Families of ELLs

Survey item 20 addresses participants' perceived biggest challenge in collaborating with families of ELLs. The abbreviated item and the percentage of participants who selected each challenge as their biggest challenge can be found in Table 3. See Appendix B for the complete item as presented in the survey. Language, culture, time, and differing attitudes about education were presented as response options, or participants could write in a different response. Written-in responses were combined by category and are presented in Table 3 as written by participants. Participants reported language and time as the biggest perceived challenges in collaborating with families of ELLs, with 38.2 percent of responses each. Parent work schedules or migration during the school year, culture, differing attitudes about education, family survival needs, and trust issues received a small percentage of responses as the perceived biggest challenge when collaborating with families of ELLs.
Table 3

Biggest Challenge in Collaborating with families of ELLs (Item 20)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biggest Challenge</th>
<th>Percentage of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differing attitudes about education</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-Family survival needs</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-trust issues</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-Parent work schedule/migration during school year</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Professional Development Participation and Awareness

Survey item 21 addresses participants' previous professional development participation and Item 22 addresses participants' awareness of professional development opportunities. The abbreviated items and the percentage of participants who indicated participation and awareness in each activity can be found in Table 4. See Appendix B for the complete items as presented in the survey. All participants reported being aware of and participating in some type of professional development activity related to cultural competence, diversity, and/or working with families of English Language Learners. Personal investigation (86%), AEA professional development (80%), consultation with an ELL Team member or other professional (77%), and conference attendance (71%) were the most common professional development activities. Participants were most aware of conferences (91%), consultation with an ELL Team member or other professional (89%), AEA professional development (86%), and graduate coursework (69%).
Table 4

Professional Development Participation and Awareness (Items 21-22) (n = 35) for both items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Awareness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage of Responses</td>
<td>Percentage of Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEAPD</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/district PD</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference(s)</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate coursework</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate coursework</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation with ELL Team/professional</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal investigation</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Desire for Professional Development

Survey item 23 addresses participants' indication of future participation in professional development regarding increasing family involvement of ELLs and the factors that may impact the likelihood of their participation. The abbreviated item and the percentage of participant responses for each option can be found in Table 5. See Appendix B for the complete items as presented in the survey. The majority of participants (45.7%) indicated that the probability of their future participation in professional development opportunities related to increasing family involvement of ELLs was dependent primarily on when the professional development is offered, followed closely by participants who indicated they would participate in future professional development opportunities related to increasing family involvement of ELLs regardless of format, when offered, credit options, or cost/reimbursement. Few participants indicated that their future participation in professional development opportunities related to increasing family
involvement of ELLs was primarily dependent on cost or reimbursement (5.7%), format (2.9%), opportunities for credit (2.9), or that they would not participate regardless of any of those factors (2.9).

Table 5

*Desire for Professional Development* (Item 23)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Desire</th>
<th>Percentage of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, regardless of format, when offered, credit options, or cost/reimbursement</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, regardless of format, when offered, credit options, or cost/reimbursement</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends primarily on format (online/in-person)</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends primarily on when it is offered</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends primarily on opportunities for credit</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends primarily on cost or reimbursement</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The researcher's chief objective is to examine educators' beliefs, practices, and the perceived effectiveness of those practices regarding family involvement of ELLs within the AEA she serves and to then determine what professional development opportunities may assist educators in becoming more knowledgeable about family involvement of ELLs. It is hoped that increased knowledge, resources, and improved professional development will lead to more effective practices, which in turn are hoped to lead to increased family involvement of ELLs and therefore increased educational achievement for ELL students. The results detailed in the previous chapter indicate that overall, the participants in this study believe family involvement is related to positive educational outcomes for students. Though they generally feel they have a positive relationship with families of ELLs and that ELL families value education, they are largely only moderately satisfied with the level of family involvement of their ELL students.

In analyzing the data, an additional research question of whether or not the participants' beliefs were related to their current practices emerged. Given a statistically significant yet weak positive correlation of $r = 0.45$, it is hard to say that more positive beliefs regarding family involvement dramatically impact current practices. Nonetheless, 20 percent of the variability in participants' current practices can be predicted from the relationship with participant beliefs. However, the correlation result could be skewed by the relatively positive attitudes of most participants, the relatively low levels of current practice implementation of most participants, and a small sample size.

The results concerning current practices and their perceived effectiveness may shed some light on why the educators are somewhat disappointed in ELL family involvement levels. Unfortunately, some of the most common practices reported in this study, such as general invitations (ranked 9th in perceived effectiveness) and opportunities to learn about the school or district (ranked 10th in perceived effectiveness), were also perceived to be among the least effective strategies for increasing ELL family involvement. Practices which were perceived to be most effective, such as opportunities for social networking (tied for 9th/10th most common), modeling of skills to help their child with homework or learning academic skills (ranked 12th, least common), and opportunities for involvement outside of
traditional hours (tied for 6th/7th most common), were among the least common. There could be many reasons for the inconsistency between common practices and perceived effective practices. Perhaps educators feel practices which are most effective require more time, effort, resources, or are otherwise impractical.

Not only was there an incongruity between common and effective practices, the average rating for having implemented a practice was above 3, indicating “agreed” or “strongly agreed,” for only two practices, general invitations for family involvement and opportunities to learn about the school or district. The relatively low levels of implementation of these practices, which research has shown to impact family involvement of ELLs, may contribute to participants’ moderate satisfaction with the family involvement of their ELL students. In general, participants who reported having implemented various practices felt their efforts were moderately effective or better. Of the 12 practices investigated, 8 yielded an average perceived effectiveness rating of 3 or above, indicating responses of “moderately effective,” “very effective,” or “extremely effective.”

The relatively low levels of implementation of research-based practices to improve family involvement of ELLs may also be due to what participants considered one of the two biggest challenges they face in collaborating with families of ELLs, time. Without the time to plan for and carry out these practices, educators may feel too overwhelmed to be able to impact family involvement of ELLs. Collectively, time and language were perceived to be the biggest challenges for over 75 percent of participants. Parent work schedules or migration during the school year, cultural differences, differing attitudes about education, family survival needs, and trust issues are additional challenges educators face which cannot be combated in isolation, but instead require systemic efforts for change.

One method used in an attempt to aid systemic change is professional development. Promisingly, all participants reported being aware of and participating in some type of professional development activity related to cultural competence, diversity, and/or working with families of English Language Learners. Beyond personal investigation, AEA professional development and consultations with ELL Team members or other professionals were the most common form of professional development, which should encourage AEA staff that they in fact have the power to impact other educators with their work. A very high
percentage of participants were aware of and took advantage of various professional development opportunities, including conferences, consultation with an ELL Team member or other professional, AEA professional development, and graduate coursework. In terms of increasing participation in future professional development related to increasing family involvement of ELLs, it seems the single biggest factor is when the professional development is offered. With busy schedules to juggle, educators need flexible professional development offerings in order to be able to participate. Despite such demanding responsibilities, a staggering 40 percent of respondents were willing to attend future professional development regardless of any other factors. Given the opportunity, there certainly is significant interest in and dedication to learning more about how to improve family involvement of ELLs.

This willingness to learn and a desire for future opportunities for skill advancement are also evident in the participants' additional comments, which can be found in Appendix E. These additional comments revealed that educators are concerned about family involvement and are interested in overcoming the barriers that sometimes limit the family involvement of ELLs. Some participants even commented that they or their districts are currently researching family involvement or are taking steps to provide more activities for families of immigrant students. Others took the opportunity to indicate a desire for more specific professional development in the areas of migrant families, special education evaluation and eligibility for ELL students, and how to cope with language barriers, family dysfunction, and economic issues.

**Implications**

The valuable insights of participants and the data they provided make this a pertinent and immediately useful piece of research. Based on this study, there is a demonstrated need for and interest in additional professional development opportunities regarding family involvement of ELLs and the many practices and factors that can influence the actual and perceived family involvement of ELLs. These results indicate a need to raise educators' awareness and implementation of practices which research has shown to impact family involvement of ELLs. Opportunities for social networking and modeling of skills to help children with homework or learning academic skills are particularly underutilized and may increase with quality professional development to provide educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to
implement these practices. Increased levels of effective family involvement practices may lead to more family involvement, high educator satisfaction, and perhaps even more implementation of effective practices after observing positive results.

Undeniably, in order to improve their knowledge and implementation of research-based strategies to increase family involvement, educators must be provided with the time and systemic support to do so. Time alone was the single biggest factor impacting the educators' likelihood to participate in future professional development. These professional development offerings must be flexible and administrators must provide educators with the time to attend workshops, conferences, or explore with professional learning communities. Furthermore, it cannot be the teacher's sole responsibility to implement practices to increase family involvement. Family activities, access to translators and interpreters, opportunities for social networking, and other key strategies do not happen without significant collaborative systemic efforts. It takes a community to plan for and invest in these efforts. Results from this study indicate that the desire is there, but that desire may be squandered without the proper tools and support to turn that desire into a reality.

Limitations

Despite the useful data and insights gained from this study, there are, of course, limitations as well. First of all, the sample size of 35 limits the generalizability of the findings. Although the return rate of the survey was higher than average return rates, the small sample size does not allow for conclusions from this research to necessarily apply to all educators in Iowa or across the US. However, the findings of this study may be applied to the professional development practices of the agency in which it was conducted. Additionally, the methodology used in this research relied on participants having access to a computer and email and being comfortable with online survey completion. However, educators within the AEA have completed numerous other surveys which used similar formats, so the technology and format used was likely not a significant barrier to participation. In fact, the ease of completion and the comfort level of the participants were likely higher than if another format not typically used in the AEA would have been utilized. On the other hand, the use of an ELL list serve from the AEA may have skewed results due to participants likely demonstrating a previous interest in topics related to ELLs.
Furthermore, the questions in the survey measured ELL educators’ perceptions, which may or may not be accurate reflections of reality. The self-report nature of the survey may be affected by social desirability. Individuals may have tried to portray themselves more favorably, or they may have reported themselves in a more negative light in order to elicit a response of increased support. The researcher attempted to mitigate these possibilities by stating in the consent letter that the survey data would not include questions that would allow personal identification and that the answers given would not affect the educator’s access to AEA supports.

Finally, there may be a lack of understanding of the need to move beyond parental involvement to a more inclusive term and model of family involvement. Even though the researcher intentionally used the terminology of family involvement, participants may have limited their responses based on a perception that family means only parents in the context of involvement. This could limit the perceived family involvement and the perceived effectiveness of current practices.

**Future Research**

Given the dearth of research about family involvement which is inclusive of family members beyond parents and that is specific to ELLs, future research should focus on these important issues. More data on what is most effective specific to families of ELLs is needed instead of assuming findings from the general population will also apply to families of ELLs. This study also illustrates the need for additional research regarding the barriers teachers face when attempting to implement effective practices, as well as ways of obtaining a deeper understanding of educators’ needs in terms of professional development and systemic support. Future professional development and research needs to encompass a more in-depth model that provides more profound and meaningful learning rather than a surface level understanding of the issues impacting the families of ELLs.

Additionally, it is important that future research is done from the perspective of ELL families instead of focusing primarily on educators alone. When attempting to get the families of ELLs more involved in students’ education, it is imperative to ask the families themselves how to best collaborate in order to achieve this desired outcome. ELL families have endless insights regarding their challenges, strengths, resources, and preferences related to being involved in their family member’s education.
Educators, families, and students can achieve much more when they are able to utilize each other's strengths, ameliorate each other's weaknesses, and continuously work together to ensure success for all learners.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
AGENCY CONSENT LETTER

(Address of Human Participants Review Committee)

Dear Review Committee Members:

(Name of AEA) Area Education Agency gives Stephanie Strouse permission to use the agency's email list-serve for educators working with English Language Learners in order to elicit responses to a survey investigating teachers' practices relating to family involvement of English Language Learners. Participants will include English Language Learner teachers, school administrators, and general education teachers within (Name of AEA) Area Education Agency. Participants will be sent a link to complete the survey electronically using Zoomerang. (Name of AEA) Area Education Agency agrees to cooperate with Stephanie Strouse in providing access to and use of the list-serve.

Sincerely,

(Name, Signature)

Communications Supervisor
APPENDIX B

SURVEY

English Language Learner Survey

Please complete the following information about yourself:

1. What is your gender? *
   - Male
   - Female

2. What is your educational role? * Please specify if "other".
   - English Language Learner teacher
   - General Education classroom teacher
   - Administrator
   - Other: 

Please carefully read the following statements and indicate your opinion with strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree. Please answer honestly, there are no wrong or right answers.

3. Family involvement is related to positive educational outcomes for students.
   - 4 Strongly agree
   - 3 Agree
   - 2 Disagree
   - 1 Strongly disagree

4. I am satisfied with the level of family involvement of my English Language Learners.
   - 4 Strongly agree
   - 3 Agree
   - 2 Disagree
   - 1 Strongly disagree

5. Families of English Language Learners value education.
   - 4 Strongly agree
   - 3 Agree
   - 2 Disagree
   - 1 Strongly disagree

6. Families of English Language Learners view me as the expert and are hesitant to get involved or share their perspective.
   - 4 Strongly agree
   - 3 Agree
   - 2 Disagree
   - 1 Strongly disagree

7. I have a positive relationship with the families of my English Language Learner students.
   - 4 Strongly agree
   - 3 Agree
   - 2 Disagree
   - 1 Strongly disagree