Our voices: A descriptive account of African American parental involvement in an urban elementary school

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OUR VOICES: A DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN AN URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A Dissertation

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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July 2011
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory to Janet Elaine McClain (1950-
2010), for her humility, her thirst for knowledge and her lifelong love of books.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank God, through his Son, first and foremost for giving me the knowledge, endurance and fortitude to see this endeavor to completion. Next I would like to thank my parents Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Stevenson for their never ending love and support. Truly love never fails. I would like to thank my birth father, Rasberry Williams, for giving me life. Although you have been absent for many years you still hold a place in my heart.

To Toril, my husband, my lover and my friend, Thank you. To our children--Christian, Torejalia, Toril II, Caleb, Joshua and Kaleia--my prayer is that you will see this example and know that nothing is impossible with God. To my brother, Martez, thanks for always being in my corner and being the lifter of my head. I love you.

To Dr. Linda May Fitzgerald, words cannot express my appreciation for your tireless faith in me. I truly thank you for holding my hand throughout this trying process and pushing me to Excellency. To my other committee members, thank you for your support, professionalism and dedication throughout this entire process. I appreciate you all.

To the countless others in my family and community that said a kind word of support, I am eternally grateful. Thank You
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OUR VOICES: A DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN AN URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

An Abstract of a Dissertation

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

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July 2011
ABSTRACT

Parent involvement may have implications for student achievement (Epstein, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brisse, 1987; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). Today African-American parents are frequently criticized for not being involved enough in their students’ education (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006). African-American parent involvement can be limited due to a lack of time, monetary resources, or transportation; past negative experiences with school; a non-welcoming school environment; or a different definition of parent involvement (Epstein, 2001, Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hill, et al., 2004; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Missing from the research of both Hoover Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 2010) and the Epstein (1986, 2001) models of parent involvement are cultural narratives of African-American parents’ explanations for the nature of their involvement.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe how one group of African American parents explains the nature of their involvement with their children, and their children’s teachers and school. Specifically, the study was designed (a) to understand what motivated this group of African American parents to become involved in their children’s education; (b) to explore what parental role construction guided their parental involvement; and (c) to describe how these African American parents perceived their teacher, student and school invitations for involvement.

Eight African American parents involved in their students’ education participated in this study. The methodology used for the study was a narrative interview. A narrative interview can be considered when the idea is to see respondents’ answers as cultural
stories to examine the rhetorical force of what interviewees say as they deploy their narratives to make their actions understandable to those who otherwise may not understand (Silverman, 2003). This research design was used to examine the explanations of this group of African American parents regarding their involvement with their child, their child’s teacher and school. All families shared participation in the same school, called Strathmore here. A deviant case analysis was in order as Strathmore, with a population that was 92% African American, had much higher parent-teacher conference participation rate at 94% than the local district or the national average of 74%. Themes that emerged from parent explanations of their involvement were: school climate, role construction and family involvement.

Parents viewed their involvement in their child’s education as a welcomed responsibility derived from the fact of being a parent. They did not report taking cues from other parents in the role construction for their involvement as Hoover-Dempsey, Walker and Sandler would suggest (2005a). Parents reported the importance of a welcoming and inviting school as demonstrated through positive parent-to teacher relationships and teacher-to-child relationships and an overall attitude of professionalism to support parent involvement at school. This group of African American parents also welcomed involvement with their child by extended family members, including siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

The findings of this research describe a deviant case because all parents reported a positive experience, which is not typically reported for African American parents. This group of parents indicated that their involvement was a requirement of their background.
If the school had not been as welcoming and responsive then parents may have chosen to discharge their duty to be involved by instead becoming more involved at home. To gain further insight, future research should be conducted at a predominately African American school where relationships are not as positive to compare narratives from those parents. Their stories may be different and would further add to the conversation on what motivates African American parents to become involved in their child’s education.

Future research should take into account parents that do not have a positive experience as well as schools that are not as receptive to parent involvement. This research suggests that teacher efforts to develop meaningful relationships with parents are useful. Furthermore relationships can cross color lines.

This research adds another perspective to the existing literature about African American parent involvement. Such information is beneficial for educators seeking to increase parent involvement with African American and parents from other cultures. This research has further implications for those who prepare teachers and who provide professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators to take into account cultural differences and its impact on parental involvement.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model (1997) of the Parental Involvement Process for home and school relationships proposes three major sources of motivation for involvement. The first is parents' motivational beliefs which include parental role construction and parental self-efficacy for helping their children's academic success (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). The second is parents' perceptions of invitations to involvement in their child's school from the child, his or her teacher, and the school. The third source is personal life context variables that influence parents' perceptions of the kinds and timing of involvement that seem reasonable, parent efficacy, and time and energy for involvement (Green et al., 2007).

Using a definition of parent that includes other parent-like adult caregivers (Mapp, 1997), researchers are producing evidence that a high level of parent involvement is associated with high levels of child achievement (Chen & Gregory, 2010; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins & Weiss, 2006; Epstein, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Parents do things with their children that contribute to their child's school success, and these things are influenced by invitations from their child, teacher and school (Weiss, Epstein, Henderson, Hoover-Dempsey & Jeynes, 2005).

The parent-to-school relationship is critical in understanding why parents become involved in their child's education. Schools often give parents specific tasks, materials, and guidelines to carry out school-like activities at home (Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichaha, 2001). Schools tend to define parent involvement as a way of
supporting student achievement or in terms of participating in school-initiated functions (Dearing et al., 2006; Epstein, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987).

Parent involvement practices at schools tend to focus on more traditional roles, such as increasing participation in groups or parent committees and drawing parents into working with their children on academic tasks at home (Dearing et al., 2006). School-based involvement activities generally include activities typically undertaken by parents at school which are generally focused on the individual child, such as attending a parent-teacher conference, observing the child in class, and watching the child’s performance in an activity (Green et al., 2007). School-based involvement behavior may also focus on school issues or school needs, such as attending a school open house, fund-raising activities, and volunteering to assist on class field trips (Dearing et al., 2006; Green et al., 2007).

Parent involvement at home includes providing help with homework, discussing the child’s schoolwork and experiences at school and structuring home activities (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Some parent involvement activities done in the home may or may not affect their child’s achievement. For example, Lee and Bowen (2006) reported that parent self-reported home involvement activities such as reading, cooking, discussing and going on outings with their child were not significantly associated with their child’s academic attainment. However when parents’ home involvement included providing a supportive home learning environment were questions were answered, materials and resources were made available to complete homework and the parent had a positive attitude toward their child’s learning, then achievement increased (Lee & Bowen, 2006).
School based involvement is often limiting parent involvement practices to more formal activities and may ignore the cultural sensitivity needed for diverse populations to become involved (Lopez et al., 2001). Schools traditionally have exerted little effort to develop less traditional forms of parental involvement that may be more attractive to culturally diverse parents (Comer, 2001; Lopez et al., 2001; Moll, Amantit, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992).

A parent-to-child relationship differs from parent-to-school relationship in many ways, not least of which is that the former starts at birth. Parents can choose to provide experiences in the home with their children that support later school expectations. Some activities that support school expectations are reading to their child, making books and other literature readily accessible, and frequently exposing children to other educational materials, goods, and services within the community (Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo & Coll, 2001).

The parent-to-child relationship involves what parents are doing in the home. Parent home involvement is defined as interactions taking place between the child and parent outside of school (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker & Sandler, 2005a). These parental behaviors generally focus on the individual child’s learning-related behaviors, attitudes, or strategies, and include parental activities such as helping with homework, reviewing for a test, and monitoring the child’s progress (Green et al., 2007).

Epstein (2001) proposed six types of parent involvement as a comprehensive approach to parent involvement at school. The model identifies practices that schools can implement that will promote parent involvement. Epstein’s (2001) model recognized the
school’s role in initiating and promoting parent involvement. Epstein’s six types of parent involvement include activities that may enhance students’ educational outcomes, such as parents volunteering or attending school events and participating in school related activities at home by helping with homework or checking homework once it is completed.

In explaining the systems through which parental involvement is thought to exert its influence, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker and Sandler (2005b) emphasized the psychosocial aspects of parent involvement in relation to student achievement. Hoover-Dempsey et al., (1987) developed a five tier parent involvement model. Tier one addresses both home and school parent involvement; tier two focuses on parents’ motivational beliefs; parents perceptions of invitations for involvement and parents’ perceived life contexts; tier three outlines mechanisms of parental involvement’s influence on the child’s school through modeling, reinforcements and instruction; tier four emphasizes a parent’s use of developmentally appropriate strategies and fit between parent’s involvement actions and school expectations; and tier five takes a look at student outcomes including skills and knowledge and self-efficacy for continued schools success (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005b; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005).

Both frameworks, Epstein’s typology and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s parent involvement models, describe school and home involvement, and both suggest schools have the responsibility for creating an environment within buildings that promotes parent involvement. Parents with different backgrounds may display different types of
involvement because their predispositions toward certain behaviors, attitudes and perceptions about their involvement are different (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Neither framework suggests specific strategies to incorporate parents from different cultural backgrounds.

Epstein’s (1991) model of parent involvement has six levels representing the components for schools to consider in developing a comprehensive parent involvement program. The components of the model are; Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with Community. These six components allow schools to share responsibilities with families for educating their children. Each of the six components addresses a different aspect of parent involvement. This model does not address any of the psychological aspects of parent involvement such as why parents become involved or how parent’s beliefs, role construction and self-efficacy assist in their decision to become involved. It is an example of what Hoover-Dempsey, Walker and Sandler (2005b), would suggest is a passive form of involvement as it assumes the school has the ultimate responsibility to teach the child.

According to Epstein (1995) a school’s ideas about children are reflected in the parent involvement practices. When schools do not value children, parent involvement is not valued nor is parent participation solicited in meaningful ways (Epstein, 1995). Schools can develop parent involvement plans that will address what parent involvement will look like in their building, how they will solicit parent involvement and in what forms do they want parents to participate. The Epstein model may serve as a guide for the development of school parent involvement plans.
Cultural or ethnic background may have implications for parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Mandara, Varner, Greene, & Richman, 2009). Ethnicity may become a factor in parent involvement due to the lack of participation of ethnic parents in both school and home parent involvement activities and their definition of parent involvement (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007; Mandara et al., 2009). Parents from diverse ethnic backgrounds may not get involved in their child’s schooling as a result of not feeling comfortable in the existing parental involvement definitions and activities supported at school (Comer, 2001; Lopez et al., 2001; Mapp, 2002). When the backgrounds of families and teachers differ parents may or may not choose to participate in their child’s education by implementing suggested activities at home. Additionally, cultural expectations vary with regard to what is considered parent involvement (Carlisle, Stanley & Kemple, 2005).

One African American expectation is to participate in the lives of their children as the main caregiver (Comer, 2001). Other African American parent expectations for involvement at home include reading, assisting with homework and talking to their children about school related behaviors (Lee & Bowen, 2006). James P. Comer (2005) developed a model of parent involvement designed to engage parents with ethnic and cultural differences. Comer suggested that both low income and African American parents need compelling reasons to become involved in their child’s education. Comer developed a framework of parent involvement specifically targeting African American and Hispanic low income parents. His framework is based on nine elements: three structures, three guiding principles, and three school operations. The elements in
Comer’s framework are structures which consist of: school planning and a management team consisting of administrators, teachers, building staff and parents developing a comprehensive school development plan; student and staff support team made up of the principal and staff members with expertise in mental health; parent team which develops activities that support the school’s social and academic programs. Comer guiding principles are: no-fault problem solving, consensus decision making, and collaboration. School operations: are supervised by the school planning and management team; the development of a school-wide comprehensive plan which includes curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as social and academic climate goals; and staff development (Comer, 2005). Comer’s framework is supported with child development theory recognizing that a child’s parent is his or her first teacher. Through bonding with parents, children acquire attitudes and values about learning. Comer also stated that learning and achievement are learned traits that children develop though relationships and interactions with parents and significant others.

Parent involvement has been studied across student age groups (Weiss et al., 2005). Parental involvement has consistently been shown to decrease as children age (Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Weiss et al., 2005). There may be developmental reasons supporting decreases in parental involvement as the child moves from early to middle childhood and again into adolescence, including children’s increasing needs for independence and increasing focus on peer relationships (Weiss et al., 2005).
Statement of the Problem

Parent involvement may have implications for student achievement (Epstein, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987; Lopez et al., 2001). Today African American parents are frequently criticized for not being involved enough in their students’ education (Dearing et al., 2006). It is often argued that African American parent involvement is limited due to a lack of time, monetary resources, or transportation: past negative experiences with school, a non-welcoming school environment or a different definition of parent involvement (Epstein, 2001, Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hill et al., 2004; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Missing from the research of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 2010), Hoover-Dempsey, Walker and Sandler (2005a, 2005b) and the Epstein (1986, 2001) models of parent involvement are cultural narratives of African American parents’ explanations for the nature of their involvement. Therefore, this research was designed to give voice to African American parents’ explanations of the nature of their involvement with their child, and the child’s teacher and school.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was threefold: (a) to understand what motivates this group of African American parents to become involved in their child’s education; (b) to explore what parental role construction guides this group of African American parents’ involvement; and (c) to describe how this group of African American parents perceive teacher, students and school invitations to parental involvement.
Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 includes a brief introduction, statement of the problem and purpose of the study. Chapter 2 reviews research and literature related to the importance of parent involvement, parent involvement models and African American parent involvement. Chapter 3 details the methods to be used in the study, including participants, selection process, instrumentation, research questions, data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 reveals the results of the study, details the narratives of the participants and provides themes as they relate to the parenting involvement practices of African American parents. Chapter 5 includes a summary and outlines the implications and recommendations for teachers, schools, teacher education and implications for future research.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This research was designed to give voice to one group of African American parents' explanations of the nature of their involvement with their child, and the child's teacher, and school. This chapter reviews the literature related to parent involvement in general, as well as the literature specific to African American parent involvement. Two national parent involvement models will be covered in-depth. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler parent involvement model highlights parent motivation for involvement, role construction, self-efficacy, and parental perceptions of invitations for their involvement. The Epstein parent involvement model has six components: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. This model is an activity based model. Next African American parent involvement will be discussed as it pertains to rates of involvement, what activities they perform and why they become involved.

Parent Involvement Models

Parent involvement is defined as activities intended to support their students' education, learning, and school success (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model (1997) of the Parental Involvement Process proposes three major sources of motivation for involvement. The first is parents' motivational beliefs, which include parental role construction and parental self-efficacy for helping their children's academic success (Green et al., 2007). The second is parents' perceptions of invitations to involvement from the school, teacher and child. The third
source is personal life context variables that influence parents’ perceptions of the kinds
and timing of involvement that seem reasonable and their time and energy for
involvement (Green et al., 2007).

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2010) parent involvement model provided a
theoretical framework from which to examine specific predictors of parental involvement
(see Table 1). Grounded primarily in psychological literature the Hoover-Dempsey and
Sandler Model of parent involvement seeks to understand sources of motivation for
involvement. The first is parents’ motivational beliefs relevant to involvement including
their role construction and self-efficacy. Next, parents’ perceptions of invitations to
involvement are addressed.
Table 1

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of the Parental Involvement Process: Level 1 and 2 (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental Role Construction</td>
<td>A parent’s beliefs about what s/he is supposed to do in relation to the student’s education and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Sense of Efficacy for Helping the child succeed in school</td>
<td>A parent’s beliefs about his/her personal the ability to make a difference in the child’s educational outcomes and success through his/her involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Perceptions of General Invitations to involvement from school</td>
<td>A parent’s perceptions that the school staff and school environment or climate makes the parent feel that s/he is a value participant in the student’s education and learning, and is welcome in the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Perceptions of Specific</td>
<td>A parent’s perception of specific (table continues)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Level 1: Motivators of parental involvement: Personal Psychological Motivators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invitations to involvement from the teacher</td>
<td>invitations or direct requests (in any number of forms) for the parent’s involvement in helping the student at home, engaging in school-based activities, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Perceptions of Invitations to involvement from the child</td>
<td>The parent’s perception of invitations to involvement from the child, including both specific student requests for involvement and more implicit requests for involvement observed by the parent in the student’s behavior, concerns, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Perceptions of Personal Skills and knowledge for involvement</td>
<td>A parent’s perceptions of his/her personal knowledge and skills that are likely to be helpful in supporting the student’s learning and success in school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 2: Motivators of parental involvement: Personal Psychological Motivators</th>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental Perceptions of Personal Time and energy for involvement</td>
<td>A parent’s perceptions of the demands on personal time and energy, particularly those related to other family and employment needs that may influence the availability and forms of parental support for the student’s learning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Culture</td>
<td>All elements of the family’s culture that may influence the parent’s ideas about what she/he should, can, and might do to support the student’s school learning and success.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Values, Aspirations, and Expectations for Student’s Learning</td>
<td>A parent’s expression to the student of their values regarding education, aspirations for the student’s learning and educational attainment and expectations for the student’s learning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental Involvement Activities at Home</td>
<td>A parent’s efforts in the context of everyday life at home to motivate, monitor, discuss, and support the student’s school learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-Teacher-School Communications</td>
<td>A parent’s initiation of—and/or responses to—school-initiated communications regarding the student’s progress, and suggestions for parent support of the student’s learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Involvement Activities at School</td>
<td>A parent’s involvement in school-based activities that support the student’s learning, offer opportunities to discuss or observe the student’s learning, and offer as well as opportunities to observe school events, offer support or help in varied roles at the school or in the community on behalf of the school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Motivational Beliefs

Parental involvement has its underpinnings in an understanding of psychological variables that underlay parents’ decisions to become involved in their children’s education (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker & Sandler, 2005a). These psychological variables serve as parents’ motivational beliefs. These beliefs answer the question, why do parents choose to become involved in their child’s education?

Psychological and sociological literature suggests that individuals’ understanding of their roles is essential to the productive functioning of the groups to which they belong (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005a, 2005b; Swick & Broadway, 1997; Walker et al., 2005). Roles include beliefs about what are one’s own and other group members’ responsibilities, rights, and other obligations. They also include social expectations and scripts that guide group members’ behavior in various settings (Swick & Broadway, 1997; Walker et al., 2005). Role construction functions as a motivator of parental involvement because it assists parents to think and anticipate how they might become involved and what that might look like (Walker et al., 2005).

To test parental motivational beliefs role construction Walker et al. (2005) interviewed a sample of 887 ethnically diverse elementary public school parents across grade levels kindergarten through sixth grade. They asked parents to complete a 23 question survey about their beliefs, ideas, and behaviors regarding their involvement and activities in their child’s education (Walker et al., 2005). Using content analysis, three major parental role construction patterns emerged: parent is responsible for the education of the child, the school is responsible for their child’s education, and jointly both the
parent and school are responsible for educating children (Walker et al., 2005). Findings suggest parental beliefs impacted parental involvement. However when parents supported their children they still held expectations that the school was also responsible for the education of their child. Parents viewed themselves in a partnership with the school and both had a shared responsibility in the education of the child.

Role Construction

Roles are composed of sets of expectations or beliefs held by parents for their individual behavior and beliefs about the characteristics of their group members (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005a). These beliefs include patterns of ideas that guide individual choice of behaviors within specific contexts, in this case parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005a). These roles reflect the parents’ understanding and responsibility for their behaviors around their involvement in their child’s education. These roles are subject to change as they are socially constructed. Because individual contributors are also subject to change, parents’ role construction around their involvement can change.

Parents are involved in their child’s education through their personal construction of the parental role, their personal sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school and their reaction to the opportunities and demand characteristics presented by both their children and their children’s school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Schools influence parents’ decision to become involved through personal invitation, demands, and opportunities to become involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) also suggest that parent beliefs about their parent role are shaped by influences the parents receive from other groups in society such as
family and workplace. Presence of the role construction alone, however, is not sufficient to ensure involvement because a parent needs to act on the role construction and believe that he or she has the skills necessary and opportunities for involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

As reported by Hoover-Dempsey, Walker and Sandler (2005b), there are two major manifestations of parent role construction, active and passive. Active parent role construction assumes the position that parents believe they are primarily responsible for the child’s educational achievement whereas passive parent role construction has a school responsibility focus. Parents that have passive role construction believe the school has primary responsibility for the child’s educational achievement, and that parents need act only when the school seeks their assistance and requires behaviors that support school decisions concerning their child’s education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005b).

Parents’ involvement may include beliefs and behaviors with both active and passive role construction. They may switch between active and passive depending upon the context of the child’s current school year, or the parent’s belief that they have the necessary skill and time to assist in their child’s education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005b). This self-efficacy is needed for parents to be active in their role construction for involvement.

Self-Efficacy

Parents who believe they have the skills and opportunities to become involved in their child’s education have a personal sense of efficacy. According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) parents’ sense of efficacy comes from four sources: their direct
experience of success in other involvement or involvement-related activities, the vicarious experience of others’ success in involvement or involvement-related activities, verbal persuasion by others that involvement activities are worthwhile and can be accomplished by the parent, and the emotions experienced when issues of importance to the parent are at stake.

Parents demonstrating self-efficacy make involvement decisions by thinking about the likely outcomes of their actions, and that they develop goals for involvement based on their perception of their ability to be effective in the situation (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005b). For example if a parent believes that their efforts with their child’s homework will make a positive difference for their child they are more likely to become involved in helping. Just the same if a parent believes their involvement in parent-teacher conferences will not make a difference for their child, they are likely not to attend. Parents with strong self-efficacy for helping their child are likely to be persistent in the face of challenges and work through difficulty in order to help their child succeed (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005b).

Self-efficacy and role construction are linked. Parents with high self-efficacy believe their actions will help their child and are more likely to receive support for this belief creating a more active role construction (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005b). A parent with low self-efficacy, who may try to be involved but sees little benefit for his or her involvement, is likely to adopt a more passive role construction which may ultimately lead to low involvement with their child (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005b).
In a study conducted by Hoover-Dempsey, et al., (1987) 390 ethnically diverse parents of children from kindergarten through fourth grade attending 4 urban elementary schools were surveyed. Parents were asked about their involvement in various forms of parent-school activities such as helping with homework, volunteering at school, telephone calls with teachers and parent-teacher conference attendance. Positive correlations were found between parent efficacy and hours of classroom volunteering and, hours spent in educational activities with children at home, but a negative correlation was found with number of telephone calls with the child’s teacher (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987).

Perceptions of Invitations

Parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement from others include the parents’ perception that their involvement is sought, welcomed, and valued by the child, the child’s teacher, and the school (Mapp, 2002; Walker et al., 2005). Mapp (2002) conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews of eighteen parents, identified by the principal as involved parents, including nine African American, eight Caucasian, and one Hispanic American. All of the parents had children attending a small urban elementary school with a total population of 220 students. All eighteen parents had children who qualified for either free or reduced school lunches. The parents reported that social and relational factors influenced their decision to become involved in their child’s education. The identified social factors were parent’s own educational experiences, their beliefs about parent involvement as shaped by cultural norms and values, and family time and responsibilities. The identified relational factors were staff engaging in caring and
trusting relationships with parents and staff recognizing parents as partners. Mapp (2002) identified both logical and social factors that influenced parent involvement. These social factors have been synthesized as welcoming, honoring, and connecting with parents, a process school staff utilize when inviting parents to become involved in their child’s education.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) introduced constructs that assess invitations from the child, parent, and school, and called them contextual invitations to involvement. To operationally define these constructs, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker and Sandler (2005b) interviewed a sample of 800 elementary and middle school parents. After content analysis, alpha co-efficient scores were examined for each construct which yielded sufficient reliability. The same sample was used to establish and operationally define the remaining constructs in levels one and two of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s (2010) Parent Involvement model (see Table 1).

Hoover-Dempsey, Walker and Sandler (2005b) suggested that school invitations, manifested in a positive school climate, influence parents’ decisions to become involved in their child’s education. General school invitations convey to parents that their involvement is welcomed and a valuable resource for supporting student academic achievement. School invitations are important for parents who may feel uncertain about their involvement, such as those parents who did not do well in school themselves and those from different cultures (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005b).

Specific invitations to involvement from teachers have been identified as motivators of parental involvement with parent who have children across all grade levels
Teacher invitations have proven to be important because they reiterate the teacher's beliefs of valuing the parents' contributions to their child's educational success (Green et al., 2007). Examples of such invitations include encouraging parents to visit the classroom, contact the teacher, assist with homework and attend child celebrations (Walker et al., 2005).

Although there is evidence to support the hypothesis that children's general attributes and actions create a context for parent-child interactions, child invitations for parents to become involved specifically in their education prove to be powerful (Walker et al., 2005). Child invitations can be powerful in prompting parental involvement because the parents generally want their child to succeed and are often motivated to respond to a request for assistance from their child (Green et al., 2007). Child invitations, as with both teacher and school invitations, act as encouragement to parents to become involved in their child's education. These invitations may affect parental role construction and self-efficacy as the parents sense their involvement is valued, needed and related to the overall betterment of their child.

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model is a theoretical framework for parent involvement. The model highlights parental beliefs, perceptions of invitations and the reciprocal nature of parent-child and parent-school relationships. The test of the model's generalizability, according to Green et al., (2007), would be to examine the model's predictive power across cultural groups, school types and developmental levels.

The Epstein parent involvement model also clearly recognizes the school's role in fostering parent involvement. Although Epstein's (1991, 1995) work does not
specifically list invitations as a separate component, it too, like Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) model, highlights the power of specific invitations as a motivator of parental involvement. Examples of such invitations included encouraging parents to visit the classroom and to contact the teacher regularly, making the classroom a place where parents feel welcome and assigning homework that specifically involves parents (Walker et al., 2005). Epstein's (1995) work, unlike Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997), does not address why parents become involved with their student, teacher or school or the underlying causes for parent involvement.

Epstein's (1995) activity based model gives school administrators ideas of the components to incorporate into a school parent involvement plan. Epstein’s plan could be initiated with minimal resources of time, energy and money. The plan assumes that parents will respond to the school's invitations for their involvement. This model is a one size fits all model suggesting if the school plans it, parents will respond.
Table 2

*Epstein Parent Involvement Model (Epstein, 1991)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>Assisting all families to establish home environments to support children as the student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>Establishing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication patterns about school activities and child progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>Actively recruiting parent assistance and support both at building level and in the home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning at Home</td>
<td>Providing families with ideas and information to support student achievement at home through homework and other curriculum-related activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>Including parents in important school based decisions and developing parent leaders and representatives that advocate for their children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating with Community</td>
<td>Assisting parents with the identification of resources and services prevalent in the community to strengthen schools, family practices, and student achievement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Epstein and Dauber (1991) sampled 171 teachers in 5 inner-city elementary and 3 middle schools to examine the connections between school programs of parent involvement and the practices teachers use to invite parents to become involved with their own students. The eight schools were chosen at random from a set of comparable schools in the district that met the criteria for special support in Chapter I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The teacher questionnaire was organized into 10 main questions with many sub-questions covering such topics as teachers’ practices of communicating with parents, use of classroom volunteers, involvement of hard to reach sub-groups of parents, and teacher expectations of parents (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Teachers were asked to provide comments about parent involvement practices and problems. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings suggested teachers with a more positive attitude toward parent involvement placed more emphasis on involving parents in meaningful ways (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). More positive attitudes also positively correlated with more success in involving hard-to-reach parents. There were notable differences between elementary and middle schools; elementary schools had stronger and more comprehensive parent involvement programs, more invitations given to parents for involvement and reported more parent involvement with children completing learning activities at home (Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

Partnerships between home and school declined across grade levels unless schools and teachers intentionally worked to develop and implement appropriate practices of partnership at each grade level (Snyder, 2009; Weiss et al., 2005). There are many factors that influenced parents’ willingness to become involved in their child’s education.
According to Carlisle, Stanley and Kemple (2005), the extent to which parents were willing to become involved in their children’s education was linked by the quality of experiences they had in their own education. Parents who experienced positive educational situations tended to hold positive attitudes towards their child’s schools and participated more (Carlisle et al., 2005; Epstein, 2001). Parents’ ability to believe they can make a difference in their child’s academic future by becoming involved in their education can often be influenced not only by their past experiences but by their education level (Carlisle et al., 2005; Epstein, 2001).

There may be developmental reasons supporting the decrease in parental involvement as a child ages, including the child’s increasing need for independence and a focus on peer relationships as they age (Green et al., 2007). Again, appropriate parent involvement has been shown to be beneficial throughout children’s development and to increase positive student outcomes. Green et al. (2007) reported parent assistance with homework decreased as students left elementary and middle school and entered into high school. Parent involvement changed to a supportive role and high school children still benefited from their involvement.

Relationships

Green et al. (2007) studied 853 ethnically diverse parents, with a slightly higher number of Latino parents, of 1st through 6th grade children enrolled in a socio-economically and ethnically diverse urban public school system in the south of the United States. When surveyed, parents reported interpersonal relationships with children and teachers were a motivation for their involvement in their children’s education.
Interpersonal relationships and the reciprocal nature of these relationships were beneficial to the child. Positive relationships between parent and teacher assisted in shared expectations and mutual trust which lead to increased support of children by both the teacher and parent (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Relationships between the teacher and parent were crucial in soliciting parent involvement.

Positive parent relations with teachers in the classroom and between home and school appear to be less common for ethnically diverse and low income children (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). In their study, Hughes and Kwok (2007) sampled 443 culturally diverse, 1st grade, lower achieving readers from three public elementary schools in the Southwestern United States. They found the quality of teachers’ relationships with students and their parents mediated the child’s academic achievement. Of those participating in the study, 104 were African American, 176 Hispanic, and 163 were Caucasian. To measure academic achievement students were individually administered the Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement. The Woodcock-Johnson III is an individually administered measure of academic achievement for individuals ages 2 to adulthood. This study used the Broad Reading scores that includes, letter and word identification, reading fluency, and comprehension subtests, and Mathematics scores that includes calculations, math fluency, and math calculation skill subtests. Data where evaluated using descriptive statistics. To record teacher perception of student to teacher support a teacher relationship inventory was used as well as a teacher-report home-school relationship questionnaire to assess parent involvement in their child’s education. The findings suggested that early elementary students achieve more when both they and their
parents have supportive relationships with the child’s teacher. However, African American children and their parents were less likely to experience either positive home-school relationships or student-teacher relationships that supported children’s academic achievement (Hughes & Kwok, 2007).

The United States is becoming more and more racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse. This trend is expected to continue (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Recent census figures indicate that children of color are the fastest growing segment of the school-age population (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2010). Hispanic or Latino population numbers are up 43%, African American numbers up 12%, while Caucasians grew by only 5.7% (NCES, 2010). While children of color constitute about 40% percent of the entire student population in the United States it is expected by 2035 children of color will comprise the numerical majority (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

While the demographic characteristics of students in the classroom have become increasingly diverse, the same cannot be said for the work force of teachers in schools (Carlisle et al., 2005). The ethnic diversity represented amongst students is not typically represented in the teacher workforce. Teachers are predominately European-American and middle-class (Davis, Brown, Liedel-Rice, & Soeder, 2005). This under-representation of ethnic diversity amongst educators may have an effect on parent involvement.

African American Parent Involvement

According to House (2005), African American high school seniors are graduating with reading and math comprehension scores at the eighth grade level. Approximately
fifty percent of African American students fail to graduate from high school (Barber, 2006). Some factors affecting African American student achievement include single-parent homes, poverty and lack of experiences (House, 2005). Other factors that add to African American student underachievement occur within the school. These factors are low teacher expectations, poor curriculum, ineffective leadership, inadequate resources and the lack of highly-skilled instruction (House, 2005). Parent involvement is thought to be effective in the fight against underachievement.

The Digest of Education Statistics (Snyder, 2009) using data collected from the Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey with a national sample of 10,681 parents representing 53.2 million students kindergarten through 12th grade, measured how students' parents interact with schools. Participants were selected using a random-digit-dial method and data were gathered using computer-assisted telephone interviewing technology. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. Findings suggested a higher percentage of Caucasian, non-Hispanic parents, representing 64% of the parents surveyed, were very satisfied with their child’s school compared to students of other ethnic backgrounds. The demographics of the study were as follows, Caucasian 64%, African-American, 17%; Hispanic, 17; and Asian or Pacific Islander, 2%. African American parents, as compared to Caucasian parents, were less likely to engage in such formal school-based parent involvement activities as volunteering or serving on a school committee, attending a school or class event, or participating in school fundraising efforts (Snyder, 2009).
Parent involvement is theorized to account for some ethnic differences in achievement. This stems from findings that suggest European American parents enact more practices in their homes that foster achievement than do African American parents (Mandara et al., 2009). A national representative sample of 2,284 ethnically diverse women and 4,406 of their adolescent children taken from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) sought to determine the effects of ethnicity and socio-economic status on parent involvement. Variables included ethnicity, both grandparent and family socio-economic status, maternal achievement, and parental monitoring (Mandara et al., 2009). Latent variable statistics yielded findings that indicated ethnic differences in socio-economic status made it more likely that European American parents use parenting practices that were more associated with achievement than African American parents (Mandara et al., 2009).

Parent involvement in their child’s education often occurs in the home. Children’s homes can be a scapegoat in educators’ discussions on student achievement. What occurs in children’s homes and how homes differ across different ethnic groups and class status was studied by Bradley and colleagues (2001), who reviewed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), a national sample of 29,264 European American, African American, Hispanic American, and Asian American women, with at least one child born prior to 1994. The NLSY data was collected biennially from 1986 through 1994. Data was analyzed using factor analysis. The Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment – Short Form (HOME-SF) survey, which also contained self-report answers, was administered to parents by trained interviewers. Findings
suggested poverty status had a greater impact on access to learning materials than did ethnicity. It should be noted from birth until nine years of age, both African American and Hispanic American children from lower socio-economic families were twice as likely to lack experience being read aloud to by parents, to lack children's literature in their home, and were less likely to experience talk from parents about watched television programs than European American children (Bradley et al., 2001). These findings suggest that problems for both African American and Hispanic in these forms of parent involvement may be present from a child's birth and may be the precursors to later academic failure for those same children.

Low participation rates of African American parents in parent involvement activities at school have led educators to conclude that these parents are uninterested in their child's academic performance (McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown & Lynn, 2003). African American parents' lack of interest and support has been identified as primary concerns for educators especially in urban communities where diversity is highest (McKay et al., 2003). Some suggest a more inclusive definition of parent involvement would assist educators in defining the scope of African American school parent involvement. A definition of parent involvement to be more inclusive of African American parents and others from ethnically diverse backgrounds would include ensuring their children have proper school supplies, monitoring their bed times, and making sure their children arrive to school on time (McKay et al., 2003). Epstein (2001) suggested a more inclusive definition of school parent involvement for ethnically diverse parents which included specific home activities, and ensuring the child is prepared mentally,
physically, and socially when they arrive at school. A more inclusive definition of parent involvement may be beneficial to African American parental involvement (Epstein 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 1997; McKay et al., 2003). Traditional or mainstream parent involvement definitions include attending school events, workshops, parent teacher association meetings, and academic conferences. These activities are criticized as not adequately representing the involvement of African American school parent involvement (Epstein, 1991; McKay et al., 2003).

African American children, like other children, begin to develop and learn through their first consistent caretakers, often their parents (Comer, 2001). Through early interactions a bond is established that allows the child to imitate, identify with, and internalize the attitudes, values and overall ways of their caretakers (Comer, 2001). Children who have had positive developmental experiences before starting school acquire a set of beliefs, attitudes, and values along with social, verbal, and problem-solving skills they can use to succeed in school. If African American children are not receiving these developmental benefits from their parents it may mean difficulty in school achievement and low parent involvement rates for their parents.

Low parent participation rates by urban, ethnically diverse parents represent an ongoing concern for educators (Epstein, 1991; McKay et al., 2003). Relatively little research has been examined on obstacles such as prior negative contact with school staff, concerns regarding their abilities to provide educational assistance to their children, and clashes regarding cultural values, experienced by African American parents which typically act to discourage parental involvement (McKay et al., 2003). McKay et al.
(2003) surveyed 161 African American parents with students in grades kindergarten through eight from an urban inner city elementary school. Results suggest that interventions meant to increase parental involvement at home and at school had little effect. Further exploration into parent’s perceptions of school climate, parent community support, and opportunities for involvement at school were recommended (McKay et al., 2003).

Overstreet, Devine, Bevans and Efrom (2005), studied 159 parents, mostly African American, living within an urban public-housing development. The parents were selected according to the grade level of their children: 103 parents with children ages 4-12 in elementary school, 56 parents with children ages 11-19 attending middle or high school. All the participants were female and all were receiving food stamps or other government subsidy. The children of the participants ranged in grade from kindergarten through 12th grade. Community interviewers were hired and trained to conduct interviews with participants. Interviews were one hour in length and each participant received a small stipend for participation. Parents were asked if they visited their child’s classroom, attended events at the school, and whether they were a part of the parent-teacher organization at the school.

Findings suggested that parent’s report of school receptivity is a predictor for school involvement (Overstreet et al., 2005). Amongst this group of parents of elementary, middle and high school parents, the degree to which parents felt comfortable in the school environment and reported the school accepted suggestions and sponsored activities for them significantly predicted their level of school involvement (Overstreet et
al., 2005; Mapp, 2002). Implications included a call for schools to create educational climates that are open and inviting to all families as a means of increasing parent involvement in schools.

According to Knopf and Swick (2007), parent-teacher relationships may lead to increased parent involvement. Schools that reach out to parents and invite them to become involved promote higher levels of parent involvement (Dearing et al., 2006). When surveyed, 101 low-income, African American parents who were involved with their children at home saw an increase in literacy performance by their children at school. However, these same parents experienced a decrease in involvement as their children began to matriculate into higher grades. Less than 50% of parents continued to stay involved as their children progressed from kindergarten through 5th grade (Dearing et al., 2006). Nationally 60% of African American children live in low-income homes according to the National Center for Children in Poverty (2008). Low income has been defined by the National Center for Children in Poverty as families and children with an average annual income that is less than twice the federal poverty threshold. African American families disproportionately make up a larger percentage of families living in poverty than their European counterparts (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2008). African American students living in middle class neighborhoods seem to have some of the same academic struggles facing African American students from low-socioeconomic neighborhoods. African American students sharing the same economic status as European students performed lower academically (Ogbu, 1994). Ogbu (1994) suggested that school achievement is low amongst African American students no matter what socio-
economic status or community they reside in. Ogbu (1994) shared that there are bothersome features of African American student achievement. While all minorities may start lower than their Caucasian peers in the early grades, Asian students improve and even surpass their Caucasian peers. However, African American students never catch up and progress in the opposite direction.

Anderson and Minke (2007) conducted a study with urban parents of elementary students. Two-hundred and two parents were surveyed, 137 of whom were African American. The four variables were role construction, sense of efficacy, resources and perceived teacher invitation to participate. Notable findings were in the area of resources and teacher invitations. Two-thirds of the parents surveyed identified teacher invitation as instrumental to their decision to become involved with their student both at home and at school (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Parents’ resources did not influence their decision to become involved (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Researchers indicated that resources such as transportation, time, and child care were significant barriers to parent involvement. According to Anderson and Minke (2007) when parents’ perceived their participation was highly desired by the teacher, regardless of resources, they found ways to participate. Teacher invitations had an effect on parent involvement (Anderson & Minke, 2007). When African American parents were invited to participate in their child’s education they accepted and volunteered in both home and school activities.

Parent involvement may have implications for student achievement (Epstein, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Lopez et al., 2001). Today African-American parents are frequently criticized for not being involved enough in their
students’ education (Dearing et al., 2006). It is often argued that African-American parent involvement is limited due to a lack of time, monetary resources, or transportation: past negative experiences with school, a non-welcoming school environment or a different definition of parent involvement (Epstein, 2001, Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hill et al., 2004; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Missing from the research of both Hoover Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 2005& 2010) and the Epstein (1986, 2001) models of parent involvement are cultural narratives of African-American parents’ explanations for the nature of their involvement.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Parents’ decisions whether to become involved in their child’s school or not are shaped by opportunities to become involved, whether or not they have the skills to become involved and whether or not they feel their involvement will make a difference in their children’s lives. Parents’ involvement in their child’s education may increase achievement. Before achievement issues can be addressed it must be clear how African American parents are involved with their children. Narratives of African American parents and the nature of involvement with their child, teacher, and school are missing from the literature.

To fill gaps in the parent involvement literature, this study was designed to describe how one group of African American parents explain the nature of their involvement with their child, their child’s teacher and school. The purpose of this study was threefold (a) to understand what motivates this group of African American parents to become involved in their child’s education, (b) to explore what parental role construction guides parental involvement for this group of African American parents, and (c) to describe how this group of African American parents perceive teacher, student and school invitations to parental involvement.

A narrative interview approach can be useful to search for the meanings of events and behaviors as preconditions for action (Kelley, 2011; Riessman, 2008). This approach is culturally sensitive because it does not presume a way of being, but aims to understand the participant’s reality (Kelley, 2011). The interviewer listens for ways in which...
ethnicity, culture, gender, and social context may shape an individual's behavior (Silverman, 2003). The narrative interview technique allows researchers to capture the multifaceted dimensions of life during critical moments to gain the perspective of the participant (Kelley, 2011; Riessman, 2008).

In the case of qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument, for the collection of data and analysis (Dieser, 2006). To this end, qualitative researchers involve participants in the data collection and seek to build trust, rapport and credibility with participants of the study (Dieser, 2006; Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) offered this explanation of the process participants undergo in retelling their narrative when the interviewer is of a different ethnicity than the informant:

She developed her account for a particular listener, me a white, western woman who needed to be educated about the culture, family context and expectations. If she had been talking with an interviewer of her same ethnicity she would have assumed some knowledge was shared, and developed the account differently p. 32.

Researchers from the same racial/ethnic background as the participants may have a better chance to establish rapport with participants to obtain a narrative that is uninhibited and rich in detail (Kelley, 2011; Riessman, 2008). Therefore, in this study the researcher and participants shared the same ethnicity.

**Research Design**

The methodology used for the study was a narrative interview. A narrative interview can be considered when the idea is to see respondents’ answers as cultural stories to examine the rhetorical force of what interviewees say as they deploy their narratives to make their actions understandable to those who otherwise may not
understand (Silverman, 2003). Narrative interviews also elicit truth about human experiences (Riessman, 2008). This research design was used to examine the explanations of this group of African American parents regarding their involvement with their child, their child’s teacher and school.

**Participants**

Eight African American parents with students attending Strathmore Elementary participated in this study. Participants were recruited through fliers placed in African American barber and beauty shops in the African American community, which is the North side of town. Due to the location of 5 of the African American barber and beauty shops being located within the attendance boundary for Strathmore, the eight parents had children that attended Strathmore, the local neighborhood school. Interested participants contacted the researcher individually by phone to arrange a meeting in their home or at another private location, a meeting room located in a non-school office building. During the initial phone conversation the research project was explained. At the time of the meeting, each participant received an informed consent form to review and sign. The researcher read the informed consent out loud to each participant for clarity. The meetings were audio-taped and each participant was made aware that his or her participation was completely voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequences to themselves or their children. Participant identified by pseudonyms, had the following parental roles: Diamond, presently unemployed, a single female-head of household with three children who received support from their father; Faye, married with two children and working part-time outside of the
home; Gloria, a grandmother with adult children and legal custody of her granddaughter; Israel, married with two children, a minister in the community; John, a self-proprietor and a non-custodial father of three sons; Ruby married and attending college with a son; Sam, a self-proprietor and non-custodial father with one child; Tamela, a daycare operator rearing a niece and nephew with the support of her mother

Table 3

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Relationship to Child</th>
<th>Ages of Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diamond</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>9, 6, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faye</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>7, 7, 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamela</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Adoptive Aunt</td>
<td>10, 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Names listed are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of parents.
The School District

The school district where the study took place is located in the upper Midwest of the United States. The district serves approximately 10,000 students, with a racial makeup of 59% Caucasian, 26% African American, 1% Hispanic, and less than 1% Asian and Native American students. Strathmore has a student population that is 92% African American. The district has a free and reduced lunch population of 60%, a measure of low-income. Strathmore’s has a free and reduced lunch rate of 89%. This district, like most urban districts, is facing challenges concerning student achievement specifically African American achievement. There is a significant gap in achievement between Caucasian and African American students. In addition, several schools in the district are listed amongst the lowest achieving schools in the state. This school happens to be one of them. Less than fifty percent of the student population at Strathmore was proficient in reading and math according to state and national standards.

Although initiatives are in place, at both the district and school level, to raise student achievement, a specific plan to increase parent involvement is not a current initiative. During a time when exploring the benefits of parent involvement on students’ academic achievement may prove to be beneficial, the district is no longer requiring buildings to survey parents on their involvement. The only formal tracking of parent involvement is parent-teacher conference participation. According to its 2008-2009 annual report, this district’s parents’ average attendance at conferences was 73%. At Strathmore parent conference attendance is 94%.
This high parent conference attendance rate is not typical as it exceeds both national and districts statistics for all parents. This school made up of predominately African American families participating at rates higher than the national and local averages is not what you would expect. The school also has a high free and reduced lunch rate of 89%. High poverty and high African American parent involvement is a misnomer according to the literature one would expect high poverty and low African American parent involvement.

This group of parents took the initiative to become involved in this study. All parents had children that attended Strathmore School. This group of parents had these characteristics in common; children attended Strathmore, all African American and all involved in their child’s education. These commonalities in contrast of what the literature states about African American parents, low SES and low parent involvement lead the researcher to perform of a deviant case analysis (McKay et al., 2003).

In 2006, the district implemented standards for parent involvement that include strategies from both Joyce Epstein and Karen Mapp: outreach to all parents, welcoming building environments, honoring, and connecting (Mapp, 2002). Parent involvement building plans contained 4 of the 6 types of involvement from Epstein’s (1995) plan: parenting, communicating, volunteering, and learning at home. The remaining two types, decision making and collaboration were optional. District wide parent involvement meetings were held with representatives from every building in the district participating, planning and implementing parent involvement plans in their building. Each building was required to have a parent involvement team. Plans were reviewed annually and
submitted to administration for further evaluation and critique. This building level accountability to parent involvement ceased at the District level as parent involvement plans stopped being formally collected in 2008. The District is still formally tracking parent-teacher conference attendance as a measure of parent involvement.

The school was built within the last 10 years. Before the new building was constructed, the old school had stood for more than 50 years. Strathmore sits in an urban neighborhood that once was vibrant, full of life, with many residents owning homes in the neighborhood. The neighborhood surrounding Strathmore today is deteriorating, with dilapidated homes, and rental properties. Recently, a low-income housing project was built adjacent to the school to the north. The school is within a few blocks of three esthetically beautiful African American churches one to the east, west and north of the building.

Strathmore was named after a local African American educator who worked in the school district for 36 years and was the first African American principal in the state. His personal philosophy on education is the school motto, hung in the entrance for all to read: “If it is to be it is up to me.” His photograph adorns the front office. He personally believed in the importance of parent involvement as demonstrated by a statement shared at the school dedication by his wife:

Without a doubt, his philosophy was 95% of the success of a child in school is the parent. He would say, “I am not blaming the parent, but I want the parent to realize the impact that they have on the child.” “It doesn’t mean that you have to be a perfect parent, but at least care. “At least want to do the best that you can and the child will recognize that.” (Ms. Strathmore, Personal Communication, May 2001)
Strathmore Elementary serves 420 students. The culture and school climate foster parent involvement. The halls of Strathmore are bright and vibrant and sounds are minimal during the school day. There is a sense of calm and order when one walks into the building. The first stop in the building is the central office and there the staff welcomes visitors into the building. The principal’s office can be viewed upon entry. Without hesitation, front office staff greet visitors promptly, ask how they may assist and direct parents and visitors to their destination. The school demonstrates an open door policy for parents and actively solicits their involvement through notes and phone calls, in addition to the welcome reception in the front office.

Outside the office, the principal can be seen in the hallways dialoging with staff, parents or children. Other staff manning the halls or walking children to different areas of the building can be seen reminding children of line and hallway etiquette. They may even acknowledge a visitor’s presence in the building with a smile or eye contact, but they never lose sight or control of the children. Children are allowed to acknowledge parents in the halls but the expectation is that they will stay on task and interact with parents at the appropriate time.

Strathmore has 44 licensed staff which includes teachers and administrators. The ethnicity of licensed staff at Strathmore is 70% Caucasian, 27% African American and less than 1% Asian. Strathmore can be categorized as an urban school, as urban is a term often used to denote geographic location, access to resources, and minority students (Carter & Fenwick, 2001). Urban often connotes schools whose student populations are predominantly African American or other minority and economically disadvantaged,
although the same characteristics may apply to some rural schools as well (Carter & Fenwick, 2001). The literature would not predict the high levels of parent involvement, as evidenced by parents attending teacher conferences, experienced at Strathmore. As McKay et al. (2003) stated low participation rates by urban, minority parents at formally sanctioned school activities, which would include parent-teacher conferences, are an ongoing concern for educators.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), 77% of African American parents nationally reported attending regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences, 65% attended a school or class event, 35% volunteered or served on a school committee, and 58% participated in a school fundraising event. Strathmore’s African American demographics would predict less parent involvement than both local and national norms; however, their efforts exceed the norm.

Parent-teacher conference attendance at Strathmore was 94%, which is higher than the national norm for conference attendance for African American parents. Strathmore could be considered a deviant case as it relates to African American parent attendance at conferences. Considering a deviant case is an attempt to discover particular elements or events which are causally related (Gordon, 1947; Scarpitti, Murray, Dintz & Reckless, 1960).

Trustworthiness of Data

The researcher is a consultant for the School District by which Strathmore Elementary is governed. The researcher has four children that have attended or matriculated through Strathmore. To create credibility in qualitative research,
trustworthiness of data or verification of interpretation maybe referred too (Dieser, 2006). Trustworthiness or credibility steps taken in this research included; member checks, soliciting research participant’s views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations; and peer review, providing an external check of the research process, by a colleague who asked hard questions regarding methods, meaning and interpretation (Dieser, 2006). Journaling was completed by the researcher to track feelings and ideas throughout the process.

Member checks were completed for credibility and data trustworthiness. Attempts were made to contact all of the original eight participants to conduct member checks in order to solicit the participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Dieser, 2006). Six member checks were completed to validate the accuracy of the findings and interpretations of the data. Two member checks could not be completed as the two remaining participants could not be reached. Member checks reassure participants of the good will of the research to accurately portray the information provided by the participant. According to Dieser (2006) when participants agree to be interviewed they are showing a great deal of trust and hope that what will be discovered will be for good and that the interviewer will be faithful to their experience.

**Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted by the researcher during the summer prior to and the early fall of the 2010-2011 school year. Two interviews took place in parent homes, and the remaining six interviews were conducted in a meeting room located in a non-school office building. Each interview was approximately an hour in length. Prior to the
interviews taking place, parents were informed that the interview was confidential and their participation was voluntary. Parents were also told that they could decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Parents were asked to sign a consent form before proceeding with the interview.

Creating possibilities in research interviews for in-depth narration requires the interviewer to give up some level of control (Riessman, 2008). Narrative interviewing requires following the participants down their path giving up the control of a fixed interview format, thus encouraging greater equality between the participant and the researcher (Riessman, 2008). Each participant was interviewed using semi-structured open-ended questions with an informal conversational approach (Dieser, 2006). Common topics of the interview guide addressed the nature of African American parent involvement with their child, the child’s teacher, and the school. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis.

The literature guided the development of interview questions. Parents’ beliefs about child rearing, child development and appropriate home-support roles in children’s education influence role construction (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). The interviewer asked, “What types of activities do you perform at home with your child to support the learning occurring in the classroom and how often? What other activities do you engage in to prepare your child for school?” Parental role construction also grows from parents’ experiences with individuals and groups related to schooling, and is subject to social influence over time (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; McKay et al., 2003). The following questions were asked: “How often
do you visit with your child’s teacher? Do you feel comfortable with your child’s teacher? What does he or she do that makes you feel comfortable or uncomfortable? What has your experience been with the principal or other school staff? Do you seek outside assistance to help you with your child or child’s homework? Who or what entity assists you with your child? Does anyone else in the home assist with the child?”

Like role construction, self-efficacy as it relates to parent involvement is socially constructed. It is influenced by personal experiences of success in parent involvement, vicarious experience of similar others’ successful involvement experiences and verbal persuasion of others (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). This interviewer asked the following questions: “How will your involvement make a difference in your child’s educational future? What personal experience(s) have prepared you to be involved in your child’s education both at home and at school? What activities, programs, or groups do you attend at school?”

Several types of school environments, daily structure, climate, and management practices, may be associated with higher levels of parental involvement (Green et al., 2007; Mapp, 2002). This interviewer asked the following questions: “From whom have you received invitations to participate in your child’s education? In what ways are you informed of school parent events or activities? In what ways do you feel welcome to participate?” At the end of the interview participants shared any additional information about their parent involvement with their child, school and teacher that they wanted to add.
Narrative Analysis

The narrative analysis occurred in several stages. First, each interview was transcribed. Coding of the major themes or patterns was derived from the text. A list of themes or meaning units was generated by analyzing chunks of text that reflected a single theme or meaning (Riessman, 2008; Silverman, 2003). Once themes were identified the researcher began identifying how the themes were connected to each other to make meaning of the participants’ experience. The researcher listened to the audio-tapes and simultaneously read the transcripts listening for meaning and to be sure no mistakes occurred during the transcription process.

Coding was done as chunks of text were analyzed for meaning. Integrated categories were compared and once themes emerged they were delimited and refined (Dieser, 2006). Next, examples from the data that demonstrated how the themes were derived were provided; this method of analysis is commonly referred to as the constant comparison technique (Dieser, 2006; Silverman, 2003). The constant comparison method allowed the researcher to analyze text line by line. Provisional themes began to emerge. These themes were then compared across other transcripts for consistency and to identify negative cases. A list of common themes emerged to provide explanation for the phenomenon being studied (Silverman, 2003).

Member checks were completed for credibility and data trustworthiness. Member checks are used to solicit the participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Dieser, 2006). Attempts were made to contact all of the original eight participants to conduct member checks. Six member checks were completed to
validate the accuracy of the findings and interpretations of the data. Two member checks could not be completed as the two remaining participants could not be reached. The researcher gave the participant’s the transcriptions of their interview for review. Participants reviewed sections of the manuscript for clarity and to solidify that their comments were not taken out of context and accurately portrayed their thoughts. Participants were asked to provide clarity or elaborate on statements the researcher had questions concerning the participant’s response.

A peer review, for credibility of the data, was also completed by another doctoral candidate. The peer review provided an external check of the research process, by providing feedback and asking hard questions regarding methods, meaning and interpretation (Dieser, 2006). The peer reviewer provided comments on structure and mechanics of the writing as well as the content and to be sure arguments were thorough and presented in a logical manner.

The researcher listened to the audio-tapes later, re-listening to the tapes along with reading the transcribed narratives for accuracy and clarity which provided another level of analysis. The listening and re-listening to the audio taped interviews provided clarity with attention to tone of voice, voice inflections and emphasis on words to convey meaning. This assisted to accurately interpret meaning of the interviewee.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe how one group of African American parents explains the nature of their involvement with their children, and their children’s teachers and school. Specifically, the study was designed to (a) to understand what motivated this group of African American parents to become involved in their children’s education; (b) to explore what parental role construction guided their parental involvement; and (c) to describe how these African American parents perceived their teacher, student and school invitations for involvement. This chapter is organized into themes that emerged from the data analysis: school climate, role construction and family involvement.

School Climate

Positive school climate encompasses the creation of a welcoming and responsive school atmosphere. School practices that ensure that parents are well informed about activities, student progress and other school requirements are associated with a positive school climate (Green et al., 2007, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker & Sandler, 2005a). Positive school climate is also reflected in school practices that convey respect for and responsiveness to parental questions and suggestions. Some examples of school climate were as follows:

On Monday she gets a worksheet, from her teacher, that tells everything she needs to do (for homework) for the entire week. (Gloria, Personal Communication, August 16, 2010)
Strathmore has really good communication; they’ll call your home and leave messages. (Faye, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

They’ll send a reminder note with the child and safety pin it to them. (Diamond, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

Parents reported some concerns about not being well informed:

One problem we have had, the child not bringing the stuff out of the backpack or it’s in a book crumbled up or the wind blew it away. (Israel, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

A noncustodial father reported:

I had to get on the mailing list so I could know what was going on (at school). There was a little controversy with the mothers in that they did not want me to know what was going on (at school) unless they told me. I kind of worked it out with the school and got on the mailing list so I could know what was going on and what they (students) were working instead of it just being a surprise. (John, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

Two parents reported not receiving notes or communication from the school. It is important for information that is intended for the parent to reach the parent. One form of contact may not be enough. When schools place the responsibility on children to deliver messages to parents in the form of notes sent home, the information may or may not reach the parent. Both custodial and non-custodial parents need to be kept informed.

Positive school climate also encompasses the creation of a welcoming and responsive school atmosphere through staff attitude and professionalism. Parents reported their experiences at Strathmore as the following:

There is always faculty to greet us when we show up to the events. It’s a friendly atmosphere; they make you want to come back. (Israel, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

I feel very welcome when I come in. I get a smile from one of the teachers' that is involved with my child. They shake my hand. That is a good impression it speaks volumes. (Sam, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)
I really feel welcome. The teachers all make me feel welcome. Not just his teacher, but all the teachers. So I feel really welcome there. I love this school. (Faye, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

All parents interviewed report positive feelings about Strathmore and the climate displayed in the building. When asked, “What is it about the school that is fostering this positive feeling?” parents replied:

It has to do with the teachers. If the teachers and the parents have a level of communication that can assist the child in growing, then that makes your experience positive. I have found that all of the teachers at Strathmore are very involved with the students and helping them get to the next level. (Tamela, Personal Communication, February 21, 2011)

John expressed how important being greeted upon entry of the building, the friendliness of staff and a bond he feels with the teaching staff that aid in the climate of the building that may be different from other buildings:

The fact that I can just come in and be greeted by whomever, whether it be a child or a teacher. It might be another parent. “Who are you here for? What are you looking for?” You go in there and they’re learning something or they’re doing something. The teacher will be teaching and they allow you to come in and interact with your child, take your child out of the classroom if needed. It’s just the openness and closeness that you get. It’s not just “That’s so and so’s parent.” They actually create some type of bond with you and build it to the extent that they’ll even call you if needed and have a conference outside of the scheduled conferences that they have. (Personal Communication, February 28, 2011)

Another parent, Israel, agreed that being greeted in the school building makes a difference in how he feels upon entering the school:

I’m always greeted by someone, white or black. It doesn’t matter. “Good morning Mr. Smith.” Someone is always greeting me. Sometimes they’ll take time to hold a conversation, “How is the weather today?” or whatever. It gives me a sense of relief knowing that the people aren’t there just for a paycheck. They really love their job and I can appreciate that. (Israel, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)
These parents reflected upon the importance of being greeted upon entry by all staff not just by the child’s teacher but by anyone with whom they may come into contact with in the building. Passer-by staff offering kind words or simply the exchange of pleasantries from one to the other made a difference in how these parents viewed the climate of the school. There was no mention of the importance of signage that welcomed parents into the building but for this group of parents the interpersonal interaction with building staff was the measure of school climate. These interpersonal interactions with building staff promote relationships.

The building principal and her receptiveness of parent involvement was viewed by the interviewees as a sign of positive school climate at Strathmore, John had this to say about the friendliness of the principal:

We had “Donuts for Dads” not too long ago. My father beat me there. They made sure they took him around to get the children. The principal knew where all the children’s classes were. She took him around to get my children without even asking any questions, she just went straight to their classroom. That just lets me know that the principal is aware of what’s going on in the building. She knows all her children and faculty. She knows who needs help in this and that. She’s informed. That helps a lot too, for my father to come and not know anything and not know which way to go, for her to just snap on and assist him. Just drop what she’s doing and go and take care of him and get him situated. I walked in, “Hey, your dad is in such and such classroom. He’s rounding up the kids,” she told me when she saw me. I go into the principal’s office and the secretary knows me by my first name. I don’t have a relationship with her, but she knows me by my first name. Anything I need, the hospitality. I get spoken to every time I’m in the class, walking in the hall. I’m right at home. I’m not uncomfortable. I’m not wondering why this person is not helping. You’re going to come into contact with somebody. For them to be as friendly as they are …just polite and walk over, “I haven’t seen you before. Is there anything I can help you with? Who are you here to see?” I think that’s kind of neat that they’re all working together like that. (Personal Communication, February 21, 2011)
Tamela said about the principal:

“The principal, she personally knows the kids. They’re not just a student. They’re just like her kids, she knows them.” (Personal Communication, February 21, 2011)

Faye commented:

I think it’s the school and the principal. Just knowing who the principal is, once you meet her, the whole school follows suit with her and it’s just kind of the same type of spirit and atmosphere. I think all the teachers live up to whatever the principal’s expectations are. From being at the school, I kind of watch the principal. I sit back and watch and I see how she observes. Even serving lunch, she’s in there hands on. She’s not just giving orders, she’s in there hands on. I see the atmosphere between the principal and the teachers. It seems like they have a good relationship. If you be nice to somebody, it makes them have more respect for you. I think the principal has that good attitude and it rubs off onto her staff and then it passes down to the students. You can just see it. I think that’s why it all falls into place. (Personal Communication, August 31, 2011)

The significance of the building principal setting the tone for parent involvement was appreciated by this group of parents. They watched how she interacted with them, with staff and paid particularly attention to how she assisted with everyday school functions and they could appreciate the principal’s engagement not only with them but with family, teachers and students.

School Contacts

Schools contact parents for various reasons. Parents are contacted if a child is ill, having difficulty or there is a school activity that warrants their attendance. School contacts are composed of activities typically undertaken by parents at school such as attending conferences, observing the child at school and watching their child’s performance in a school activity (Green et al, 2007). All eight parents reported making regular school contact:
The children are pretty excited about us going to the school program as a family. (Diamond, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

We always attend all the days when they have parent involvement. I don’t know what they call them, parent night, family fun night, all those activities we attend. (Israel, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

I attend those programs and talk to the teachers that are there helping her along the way. (Sam, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

Actually I would say daily (contact) because I write in my children’s planner every day. (Tamela, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

The minute I walk into the class, not only does my child’s face light up, but the other kids, their faces light up too. (Faye, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

Parents felt empowered enough to make school contacts whether or not they had been invited by the teacher. When teachers initiated contact with parents they responded. One parent stated:

Another important thing is for the parents to be responsive and know what their child is doing in school. When they take the initiative to reach out to the parents, we should take the initiative to go and see about our children. (Sam, Personal Communication, February 22, 2011)

Parents visited the classroom during class times and before and after school to converse with the teacher about their child, especially during drop-off and pick-up times. Parents sought out contact with the school as a means to stay appraised of student behavior, school activities and learning in the classroom. Again parents saw their involvement as a requirement not as a choice therefore this belief made it possible for them to take the responsibility or initiative to contact the teacher or school whether they had been contacted or not. Another parent expressed her opinion in this manner:

I think everybody got a responsibility. The school don’t have to invite me. It’s my job to be there. When I get there they just welcome me in the classroom.
“You can have a seat, you can sit next to her, you can help in the classroom.” We just go from there. (Gloria, Personal Communication, August 16, 2010)

The school initiating contact assisted parents to become more involved with their children at school.

Perceptions of Invitations

Parents received various forms of invitations from their teacher, child and school. However it was the intent behind the invitations that impressed one parent:

They actively invite you. In the past (at another school) it has been my experience where teachers have set themselves apart from the children and the family because they’re the experts. You just didn’t get that warm feeling, that personal communication with the teacher. The kid kind of felt disengaged from the teacher and the curriculum. But it has been my experience at this school that the teachers want you to be involved. They want to not personally know your business, but they want to get to know you and become one of your family members, per se, for the year. (Tamela, Personal Communication, February 21, 2011)

Invitations are associated with enhanced parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker & Sandler, 2005b). Invitations support the creation of a welcoming and responsive school environment, school practices that ensure that parents are well informed about student progress, school activities and school requirements; they are also reflected in school practices that ensure respect for and responsiveness to parental ideas, questions and suggestions (Green et al., 2007). Teacher invitations are influential because they underscore the teacher’s valuing of parent contributions to their child’s education. Examples of teacher invitations were:

They send notes home in the backpack inviting you to school functions. (Gloria, Personal Communication, August 16, 2010)
We get phone calls with a recorded message reminding us of school events and school closings. (John, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

The teacher often tells me what’s coming up and if I need to come or not. (Tamela, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

Parents did not receive teacher invitations to assist with specific homework activities at home. Home activities, worksheets, were sent home with little to no instruction on how to assist children in completion. However all parents were clear on due dates for homework assignments to be submitted to the school. Parents’ lack of knowledge and ability to assist in homework completion with their students has been given as a variable in the lack of African American parent involvement (Trotman, 2001). This group of parents was not asked if they had the skills to assist their child with homework; it was an assumption that parents knew how to assist and if not that they would ask or be resourceful in finding someone to assist them.

Invitations from the child are often powerful in prompting parent involvement, in part because parents generally want their child to succeed and are motivated to respond to their children’s needs (Green et al., 2007). Explicit requests or invitations from children also often result in increased parental involvement. Of all kinds of invitations--school, teacher and student--requests from the child yielded the best results and may be increased by school actions to enhance parental engagement in their child’s education (Green et al., 2007).

Parents reported child invitations as the most significant factor in their decision to become involved in their child’s education at both home and school. They could not resist their children’s “cute” faces when their child asked, “Daddy, will you come to my
school for Doughnuts with Dads?" or "Mom will you come to my awards ceremony?"

Child invitations were successful at requesting assistance from parents with homework assignments and attending school activities.

The intent behind the invitations, not the invitations themselves were important to this group of parents as they did not require invitations for their involvement. According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) invitations enhance parental involvement. These invitations come from the teacher, school and child. This group of parents responded to invitations from their child for their involvement. Parents reported child invitations as the most significant factor in their decision to become involved in their child's education. They also responded to teacher invitations, when the invitation directly benefited their child. Parents did not respond to invitations from the school. No parent attended the parent organization at Strathmore after receiving invitations to attend.

Lack of participation in parent-decision making groups at school has been cited as a concern with African American parents as they generally are not involved at the decision making level within the school (Comer, 2005; Trotman, 2001). This group of parents fit the pattern of not participating in the parent organization at Strathmore.

Relationships

Relationships were important to this group of parents. Through relationships with teacher and staff parents reported feeling comfortable with their child attending the school and appreciated the level of trust that had developed between them and the staff. Mapp (2002) identified connecting with parents a key for inviting parent involvement into their child's education. She suggested that school staff be purposeful in their attempt
to connect with families by inviting their input in decisions, welcoming parents to the classroom with an open door policy and forming relationships that go beyond the classroom. Relationships like these can help to put the parent at ease, which is even more important for African American parents as they tend to be skeptical about the solicitation of their involvement (Dearing et al., 2006; Knopf & Swick, 2007).

Solicitation for involvement can mean one of two things: good news or bad news. African American parents being skeptical about the solicitation of their involvement would warrant initiations at the onset of the relationship-building process. One parent responded concerning relationships:

It’s the biggest part. Without a relationship with the teacher, you don’t have anything. The students don’t have much learning because you wouldn’t know what is going on in the classroom. But if you get in a relationship with the teacher you have it all. You know what your child is doing, if he’s achieving in school, if he’s not achieving I school. If he’s misbehaving, if he’s not misbehaving. You don’t know how big that is, that the teacher is able to communicate and put things together with the parent. (Gloria, Personal Communication, February 21, 2011)

This group of Strathmore parents was highly involved with their child and teacher. They were willing to assist their child with homework and attend school activities. They were eager to attend conferences as they wanted to know how their individual child was behaving and performing in school. Parents were an extension of the teacher in the home, following through with teacher expectations for behavior and learning goals for their child. Parents completed tasks and at home assignments asked by teachers.

Parents had pride about their children attending Strathmore. One parent stated, “When it was formed by Dr. Strathmore his desire was to reach out to youth and make sure that they had a strong educational background and put them where they
needed to be for the future. We need great structure in our community. I think that this school is really doing a good job with our children, bringing them to a point where they need to be so when the future comes, the structure and the foundation has already been set, from the school standpoint. I think it’s really an honor and a privilege for me for my daughter to go to this school and be able to learn and not be distracted. (Sam, Personal Communication, February 21, 2011)

The sense of pride as explained by this parent went beyond the relationships he had built with teachers at the school but in remembering the school’s namesake, the first African American principal in the State of Iowa. In times past education to the African Americans meant a better future and for these parents they echoed that sentiment.

These parents were engaged with their children, mainly completing literacy activities in the home. What is it that these parents are being asked to complete with their children? These parents reported that notes came home with homework assignments but they did not specify what kind of support the school offered to support their activities at home. These parents were willing to help complete homework. However they were self-reliant on finding support to complete activities as not parent mentioned specific strategies being given to them from teachers to implement at home to raise achievement.

Many educators have already created in their minds what parent involvement entails, what a parent should and should not do or how much parents are able to accomplish with their child. This group of parents reported time, transportation, or resources were not an issue for involvement in their child’s education.

The parent-to-school relationship was critical to this group of parents for their involvement. Strathmore did not give parents specific tasks to complete with their child. However parents mentioned the importance of teachers and building staff building
relationships with them. Hughes and Kwok (2007) reported that ethnically diverse parents do not have positive relations with their child’s teacher. By contrast this group of parents reported positive relationships and feeling comfortable in exchanges with their child’s teacher.

This group of parents did not participate in the parent organization at the school, which is a decision-making body at the school. Therefore they were largely unaware of the progress of other children or the school as a whole as they were concerned with their own child. At Strathmore the school motto is, “If it is to be it is up to me.” This statement may be true. Change can be brought on by one individual. Parents can make a difference in the education of their children.

Role Construction

What parental role construction guided this group of African American parents to become involved in their child’s education? Parental role construction according to (Green et al., 2007), incorporates their beliefs about what they should be doing in relation to their child’s education. Parental role construction is often influenced by their experience with other parents, groups involved with the school, family, all of which is subject to change (Green et al., 2007). By contrast, these parents reported primarily receiving support and direction for their involvement from their parents, their child’s grandparents. Statements such as:

How I am with my son, my mother was the same way. Therefore I am passing down to my son what my mother did with me basically doing what I know. (Israel, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)
I talk to my mother to get some input (with my child) because I know how she raised me and I get advice from her on how I should do it. (Sam, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

My mother plays a big role in the kid’s education and she supports me 100% with the decisions that I make towards their education. (Tamela, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

Parent involvement in African American homes often encompassed the entire immediate family as well as extended family. Participants not only reported the assistance of grandparents but other family members, especially older siblings living in the home. Parents report that:

My son has this thing with his older sister, whatever she tries to teach he says, “I already know,” so sometimes that doesn’t work out that good. (Israel, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

Her grandmother, my mom, and also her grandmother, her mom’s mom, do a great job with her. They make sure that she’s paying attention and being cooperative at school. (Sam, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

Parents felt proud when family was involved in the child’s education. A sense of accomplishment was felt by the parents when grandparents and siblings shared responsibility in their child’s education creating a strong sense of togetherness and cooperation for the betterment of the entire family. This involvement by the family could be thought of as together we stand but divided we will fall.

In times past African American children were thought of as the hope for the future not just for themselves but for their families and entire race. This sentiment of hope is expressed in Hughes (1968, p.10) were he stated:

Now, through my children, young and free, I realized the blessing denied to me.
Hughes went on to state in lines 31 through 36:

I had only hope then, but now through you,
Dark ones of today, my dreams must come true:
Remember my sweat, my pain, my despair.
Remember my years, heavy with sorrow-
And make of those years a torch for tomorrow.

If one child could make it, become successful in this present world then through that child giving back to their family, would raise them out of poverty, despair or their current condition. Like Langston Hughes, the sentiments of this group of African American parents hoped that by the very act of their involvement, sacrifice of time, work and effort, in their child’s education these actions will somehow secure a better future for their child as well as themselves.

Considering the participant beliefs about parent involvement assisted in understanding their role construction for involvement. Positive personal beliefs about helping one’s child succeed at school are associated with increased parental involvement across all grade levels (Green et al., 2007, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Parents reported their beliefs as they related to parental involvement as the following:

I would like to be more involved with my children, but I only got my GED and I didn’t go to college and I think that would be helpful because even when they get in high school they might still need help. (Diamond, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

I think that with my involvement with him, that he will see education as something that is very important because of the way that we are working with him. It is very important to school our children at home. We cannot depend on the teachers to do everything; it has to continue at home. I see that as very important. (Israel, Personal Communication August 30, 2010)

Parents believed that their involvement was a role or part of just being a parent. Rather than being a requirement expected from the school. It was an obligation to secure a
better future for their children. Parents formed these beliefs from watching their own parents’ model these beliefs when they were children. Now that they are parents they are putting into practice the parent involvement they observed as children. Examples of parents learning from their parents were as follows:

I look back at home at how my mom interacted with me. My father worked in a factory and my mom took care of the home. How I am with my son, really helping him with him with his education, his learning, I’m kind of passing that along to him. My mother was the same way. (Israel, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

My mother and father, for one thing, were involved in our lives. They’ve shown me what to do. (John, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

Parents did not take cues from other parents in their role construction for involvement. Instead watching their own parents’ involvement along with their own motivation and beliefs is what influenced their role construction for involvement.

Motivational Beliefs

What motivated this group of African American parents to become involved in their child’s education? Parents felt obligated to be involved in their child’s education. The responsibility of parenthood involved being involved in their child’s education. The parents felt that their involvement would somehow lead to a better future for their child. Their motivation was intrinsic, not influenced from outside of themselves.

Parents did receive support from other siblings in the home and from grandparents. Parents used their personal resources as necessary to stay involved with their child. As the literature would suggest time, transportation and money are often deterrents to involvement. However with this group of parents that was not the case. Parents took on responsibility to assist their child with homework completion, attend
parent-teacher conferences and support other school activities with their presence. If they could not attend, this group of parents made arrangements for a grandparent to attend. If additional assistance was needed for their child’s homework completion, older siblings and extended family members were recruited to help.

Motivation for parent involvement encompasses parents’ role construction. Roles are a set of beliefs or expectations held by an individual that guides their behavior in a particular setting (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005b). Parent role construction is not an isolated processed but is influenced by their involvement with social groups, family and community. Parents were motivated to become involved in their child’s education hoping their involvement would somehow produce a better future for their children. One parent shared, “It’s real important for you to go to school so you can get your education so you can get a good job and make a lot of money (Israel, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010).” Another parent had more general comments regarding her children’s future: “I want them to know education is important and the sky’s the limit (Tamela, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010).”

Parental involvement is motivated by parents’ interpersonal relationships with their child and teacher (Green et al., 2007). Some parents reported having good relationships with both the child’s teacher and the child. Some examples that characterized parent’s relationships with teachers were:

I have not had an uncomfortable (experience) with her. I just took a liking to her right away. (Faye, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

His teacher has really done a lot as far as helped him to develop him to be the student that he is today and I appreciate that. She encourages us to help him at home as much as possible. (Israel, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)
We call each other; I have her (personal) cell phone number. It’s more like a friendship, it’s not just like she’s the teacher and I’m the parent we are more involved that. (Ruby, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

This group of African American parents was clearly self-motivated to become involved in the education of the children. Research suggested that this group would be hard to reach to establish relationships. African American parents have been described as hard to reach; for instance, phones, if present in these homes, often are disconnected (Trotman, 2001). To the contrary these parents made themselves available to the school and teacher through various avenues: visits to the classroom, notes sent to the school and phone calls placed by parents to the teacher soliciting classroom needs.

This group of parents cherished the relationship built with the teacher. Their comments were glowing when they recounted how it made them feel to witness the positive relationship the teacher demonstrated, not only with their child but also with the other children. Parents trusted the teachers to do what was best for their child because of the relationship they had built with them.

Parents appreciated the familial aspect that Strathmore teacher’s demonstrated with children. The parents wanted to know that the teacher cared for their child like a parent. That was important for this group of parents. The parents spoke positively when describing their child’s relationship with the teacher. Parents viewed the teacher as an extension of themselves and not as an authority figure. This was seen in comments such as, “I have high respect for her (Diamond, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010).” and “My son’s teacher is really great I have to compliment her (Israel, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010).” One parent reported being in the classroom and
hearing the teacher say to the students, "When you’re here, I’m the mom (Faye, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)." Parents appreciated positive teacher-child relationships as seen in such comments as, "I love to watch my child with Ms. Corn, the respect that she gives him, you can’t get any better than that (Faye, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)."

Unfortunately, some teachers believe that African American parents, especially those whose children are receiving free or reduced lunch, may not be able to attend meetings, conferences, plays and other school activities because they do not have transportation or other needed resources (Trotman, 2001). None of the parents reported resources, other than time, as a motivation for their involvement. Nothing could stop this group of African American parents from supporting their child at school. They wanted to be sure someone would be there for their child. If parents could not attend school activities this group of parents contacted grandparents to come and support their grandchild at those activities. Someone being present for the child at school activities was important. They wanted the child to know that they were supported both at home and school and for these parents attending school activities was a function of their support.

Self-Efficacy

Parent role construction as well as self-efficacy may also be impacted by the quality of experiences they have had in their own education (Green et al., 2007). Parents who have had positive educational experiences of their own tend to hold more positive attitudes toward schools and participate more frequently than parents who have negative
experiences. When asked, “What personal experiences have prepared you to be involved in your child’s education?” parents responded:

I got my GED and didn’t further my education as far as going to college. I just think it (education) would be helpful for them. That way I can help them and go back to school and we can all learn together. (Diamond, Personal Communication August 31, 2010).

This parent reported attending an alternative high school because she had negative behaviors and attitudes with teachers and looking back on the experience she wished that she would have taken more advantage of the opportunity she was given to go to complete school instead of dropping out later to complete her GED. She was remorseful about her negative school behaviors and wanted better for her children. This parent also relied heavily on family involvement and support of her involvement:

I got my other kids, so my oldest ones help me out with the younger ones because they like to be in control as far as teaching and wanting to do everything. Their grandmother helps a lot, she asks the kids what they are learning and tries to assist also if I have a question about some work they bring home from school I call my sister, she helps me a lot. (Diamond, Personal Communication August 31, 2010)

This group of parents’ involvement was not dependent on their past experiences with school. Parents expressed a belief that being involved with the child’s education is typical and what they should be doing as a parent. Involvement at school and home for this group of parents was an expectation for themselves not an option. When asked, “In what ways do you feel welcome to participate?” Parent responses were:

I feel welcome because I think every parent should be involved with their children. (John, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

I know there is a need and we have to school our children at home to help them learn faster, we can’t as parents just depend on the teachers to do everything. She
This group of parents took responsibility for their own involvement. They were resourceful in finding ways to stay involved whether that involved siblings assisting with homework, grandparents attending school activities or non-custodial fathers communicating with custodial mothers to gain information on schedules so that one of them can meet the needs of their child.

**Work Obligations**

Parents’ thinking about involvement may be influenced by their perceptions of demands on their time, in particular work commitments and obligations (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005b). Parents mentioned the difficulty they have attending daytime activities. Four of the eight participants reported full-time employment working during the day. One participant attended college, two participants were employed part-time nights and one participate reported no employment. Varied responses were given related to attending school activities, although all participants reported assisting children at home with activities. When asked what activities, programs, or groups they attend at school, participants responded:

They have more awards (ceremonies). You can hardly keep up. I told them I need to quit my job just to come to celebrations. (Tamela, Personal Communication, August 16, 2010)

I like to stay involved, when they have programs at school and I am able to attend. (Sam, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

We (husband and wife) always attend all the days when they have parent involvement days. (Faye, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)
Any of the things they have at school, I’m there for all of that. Always. Even for the field trips, I’m there. (Ruby, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

Single parents reported challenges attending school activities. Some of their comments were:

I attend mostly after school programs because my schedule is so tight with work. I am working 12 hour days. (John, Personal Communication, August, 30, 2010)

I operate a home business, so a lot of times it’s kind of hard for me to get away to attend activities. (Tamela, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

I wish I didn’t have to work so I could be more involved, not just in their lives…we all have to work; I’m not rich or anything like that. (John, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

Some of these parents, in light of juggling work and parenting, informed the interviewer that with proper advance notification from the teacher about these programs, arrangements could be made with their employers so they could schedule a longer lunch or work later in the evening to make up time that would be missed from work. Parents whose jobs were more flexible tend to be more involved than those parents whose jobs are relatively demanding and less flexible (Green et al., 2007) Participants expressed more appreciation for activities held in the early evening, as the mid-morning programs and celebrations were difficult to attend because of work obligations.

Family Involvement

Parents reported older children in the home sharing responsibility for involvement. Older siblings were mentioned frequently in response to the question, “Who else is involved in the parenting of your child?” Grandparents were also
mentioned as having involvement with their grandchildren along with supporting the parents in their efforts for involvement:

My mother, she plays a big factor in their life and in their education. She backs me 100% with the decisions that I make toward their education. She loves to attend their school activities. (Tamela, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

I got my other kids, so my oldest ones help me out with the younger ones. (Diamond, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

My mom comes over and helps out a lot with her. (Gloria, Personal Communication, August 16, 2010)

I talk to my mother to get input because I know how she raised me and I get input on how I should do it. (Sam, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

Family may shape parents' role construction around their involvement. Parental motivation for involvement relies on their beliefs, role construction, and whether or not they feel their involvement can make a difference. Families may play a significant role in the education of children. This group of African American parents was comfortable with other family members assisting in the parenting and homework completion of their children.

Home Activities

The literature informed the interview questions and several themes emerged. Home activities are the interactions between parent and child outside of school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Parental behaviors associated with home activities generally focus on the individual child’s learning-related behaviors, attitudes, or strategies, and include parental activities such as assisting with homework, reviewing for a test and monitoring the child’s progress (Green et al., 2007). All of the participating parents
reported spending time completing home activities with their children. The respondents reported spending time at home completing mostly literacy activities such as reading.

Some examples of home activities were:

We read out loud together. On Mondays she gets a worksheet that tells everything she has to complete for the week in class. It gives us instructions on what we are supposed to do at home. So we read out loud together. She has to read for thirty minutes every night. She can read silently or out loud and then she has to write a summary over what she has read. Then she needs to complete her spelling. I oversee that she completes her work. (Gloria, Personal Communication, August 16, 2010)

Parents with students in the lower elementary grades home activities were mostly literacy based:

We do reading. I go on the internet and I print off worksheets. Strathmore is really good about sending homework packets home. (Ruby, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

Every once in a while I do read to him. A lot of times he likes for me to read his favorite books over and over to him. (Israel, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

Home activities also included:

I’m the one who gets him his bath at night to get ready for school the next day, brush his teeth and go to bed. I get him up, and get him ready for school. (Faye, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

We talk about what is going to happen the next day (at school). We talk about her expected behavior at school at night. Last week her goal was to make one new friend at school. I ask, “Are you a fan of the playground?” She said there is nothing to do out there (on the playground). I said, “There is tether ball, two-square, and soccer. You do need two people to play these games.” I was trying to make her see the need for friendship. (Gloria, Personal Communication, August 16, 2010)

Parents reported being involved with their children at home on a regular basis. Although some of the parents found it challenging to schedule work, school activities and parent
involvement, all participants reported spending time regularly at home with their children involved in an educational activity mainly homework completion. Parents were asked questions about the types of homework activities they complete with their child and the number of hours spent. Table 4 is the summation of parent responses to the following questions: what types of activities do you perform at home with your child to support the learning occurring in the classroom, and for how many hours per week, what other activities do you engage in to prepare your child for school, and for how many hours?

To address perceptions of invitations for their involvement, participants were asked: “Does the teacher invite you to participate in your child’s education?” Some responses were:

After the first time I talked with her, she said, “Feel free to call me if anything comes up.” She also includes her cell number, email address and the school phone number at the bottom of her “Monday Letters.” (Gloria, Personal Communication, August 16, 2010)

They send letters home and then my child will say, “Mom, everybody’s coming to school. I want you to come too.” (Diamond, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

They pretty much send a letter. Lately it’s been more or less a telephone call. (Sam, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

They see me so much up there. They greet me. “Ms. Ruby, we got this going on.” They don’t even have to ask whether I want to attend, because they already know I’m going to be there. (Ruby, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)
Table 4

*Frequency of Reported Home Activities Performed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Combined Total Number of Hours per Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy (reading, spelling, writing)</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Facts</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-off/pick up from school</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedtime Routine (bath, brush teeth, clothes preparation)</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music (singing, playing instrument)</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All participants reported being invited to school activities by their children. Child invitations for involvement included the following:

She’s so cute when she says, “Daddy, I got this program I’m involved I and I would like you to come out and be there. It’s going to be fun.” That’s how she asks me. (Sam, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

They bring notes and invitations home from school. They are so excited, “Mom, can you be there? Will you come? Mom, are you coming?” Just to see their faces light up, how can you say no? (Diamond, Personal Communication, August 31, 2010)

They are not afraid to ask questions. Sometimes they give up and want me to help do this or that, I’ll say, “Well I am not going to write this out, and you’ll have to figure it out this time.” (John, Personal Communication August 310, 2010)

He wants us to be there. He demands it. He even says that we need to be at things that we don’t have to be at because he hears teachers talking about something and he says, “Mom, we have got to be there.” (Faye, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)
Children in these households seem to possess a power of persuasion. Parents report that they are particularly effective when inviting them to attend school activities. Their children can be charming and relentless in pursuit of a goal. The schools often take advantage of children’s ability to bring parents into the building by first selling the event to them, next placing a reminder in their backpacks and lastly offering an incentive for parent participation to the child.

Community Involvement

As parents needed extra support, they did not go to professional organizations for assistance. Parents turned to extended family members, grand parents and others in the community. Parents defined community as church attendance, beauty and barber shop patronages, and non-school youth-serving agencies that are directly involved with their student or support their involvement. Some examples of community involvement were reported as the following:

   Everybody helped. As customers came in the shop all day, we were all answering questions to prepare her (student) for the annual basic skills test. They got so excited week after week in preparation for the test asking when she would be taking the test and they (customers) came back and ask what she scored on the test. (Gloria, Personal Communication, August 16, 2010)

   Actually she doesn’t do a lot at Church; they do a lot for her. She is in Sunday school, stays for morning worship and goes to evening service, just being around people that greet her with love. (Gloria, Personal Communication, August 16, 2010)

   But his Sunday school teacher I applaud her. She’s done an excellent job. She demands that “when you’re here in my Sunday school class you give me the same respect as your parent.” I feel she has not helped so much with his actual learning, ABC’s and all that, but what they learn in her Sunday school class helps his memory expand which helps him to retain what he learns in school. (Israel, Personal Communication August 30, 2010)
According to John community involvement can come from a co-worker, sharing advice and providing guidance. He stated:

Another mentor of mine manages the shop, he helps out a lot. Children don’t come with manuals. It still takes a village to raise your child. You’re not going to be able to do everything on your own. (Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

The African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child,” maybe a cliché, but it was given as an example from one parent to describe the communal effect of coming together to ensure children have what they need to be successful. Parents shared their belief that the responsibility of rearing a child should not be placed on one person or a set of parents, but emphasized the importance of interdependence on community to include family, church, neighborhoods and the community as a whole to support the overall development and education of children. One parent shared an example from his childhood of the village concept of involvement:

Just like the neighbors down the street from me when I was growing up, we had practice and pretty much the kids from the whole neighborhood was going to flag football practice. Parents would trade off. Someone else’s parents would take us to practice one day, and then my parents would take the rest of us the next day. We just planned it that way, we had it set up so everybody could get a break or do whatever they needed to do and still have us (neighborhood kids) at practices without being late. (John, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)

John also shared:

If I was somewhere when I was coming up where I was not supposed to be, or hanging out with people my parents would not approve of, they would know about it before I even got home. When I was coming up they would discipline you and then your parents would end up disciplining you too. So I came up at a time when you had eyes watching you everywhere in the neighborhood and you didn’t even know it. That was very helpful to my parents, but I am afraid it may not be like that anymore. (Personal Communication, August 30, 2010)
As it relates to the village John stated:

You were learning things from the elderly. You learn things from your child, your neighbors and others. You learn from others, in the community, experiences. Somewhere they have been and you are trying to go. The elders, church members they can give you pointers to do this and tell you that. That was real helpful growing up. (Personal, Communication, August 30, 2010)

Parents reported having limited time; none of them sought support from local parent organizations in the community. Parents relied on what they had seen or had experienced as children from their parents involving their education. Depending on their own parents’ availability, they sought support and assistance to guide their current involvement with their child’s education.

Both family and community influenced this group of parents. Community was seen as a support to involvement with this group of parents. One parent involved the community in her child’s preparation for an achievement test, by inviting patrons of her business to assist. Another parent received advice for his involvement with his child from a community elder. Both community and family relationships impacted this group of parents’ role construction for involvement with their children.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary

Today African American parents are frequently criticized for not being involved enough in their students’ education (Dearing et al., 2006). It is often argued that African American parent involvement is limited due to a lack of time, monetary resources, or transportation; past negative experiences with school; a non-welcoming school environment; or a different definition of parent involvement (Epstein, 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hill et al., 2004; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Missing from the research are cultural narratives of African-American parents’ explanations for the nature of their involvement.

This study sought to understand better the answers to these three questions: (a) what motivated this group of African American parents to become involved in their child’s education; (b) what parental role construction guided this group of African American parental involvement; and (c) how did this group of African American parents perceive teacher, students and school invitations to parental involvement. This chapter will address these questions and provide implications for teachers, schools, teacher education and for future research.

What motivated this group of African American parents to become involved in their child’s education? Parents felt obligated to be involved in their child’s education. The responsibility of parenthood involved being involved in their child’s education. The parents felt that their involvement would somehow lead to a better future for their child.
What guided this group of parents in their role construction for involvement? This group of parents' was guided by their own parents in their role construction of parent involvement with their children. Parents spoke of imitating what their parents had done as a model. Parents received support from grandparents and other community members. These interactions shaped this group of parents’ role construction.

How did this group of African American parents perceive invitations for their involvement from their school, teacher and child? The intent behind the invitations, not the invitations themselves were important to this group of parents as they did not require invitations for their involvement. This group of parents responded to invitations from their child. They also responded to invitations from the teacher and the school when the invitation directly benefited their child.

Eight African American parents with children from kindergarten through fifth grade, attending an elementary school in an urban district in the upper Midwest, participated in the study. The school provided a deviant case in that its demographic characteristics predicted far less parent involvement than actually occurred. The methodology used for the study was a narrative interview, seeing respondents’ answers as cultural stories to examine the rhetorical force of what interviewees say as they deploy their narratives to make their actions understandable to those who otherwise may not understand (Silverman, 2003). This research design was used to examine the explanations of this group of African American parents regarding their involvement with their child, teacher and school.
All of the respondents reported spending time at home completing mostly literacy activities such as reading. Invitations to participate in home activities by the teacher or school did not seem to matter as parents felt comfortable engaging with their children at home and providing resources for homework completion. Child invitations to this group of parents proved to be beneficial when it came to attendance at school activities. Children often invited parents to attend and parents responded even when work and other responsibilities had to be altered.

Parents reported feeling comfortable at the school and overall the school had a positive climate. Parents appreciated being greeted as they entered the building and the mutual respect demonstrated by teachers for both them and their child. In this group of parents dissatisfactions concerned custodial parents’ school invitations and information sharing and work day conflicts with scheduled school activities.

**Implications for Teachers**

This research suggests that teacher efforts to develop meaningful relationships with parents are useful. Parents appreciated teachers who demonstrated mutual respect for the parents as well as their children, helping them to feel welcomed in the school building. Teachers’ school-to-home communication was done with notes being sent home, and with occasional phone calls. Teachers also asked parents directly to become involved. These tactics to involve parents were effective to parents living in the same household. Non-custodial parents reported receiving less information and having some difficulty keeping informed of school activities and the progress of their child. Non-custodial parents were dependent on the custodial parent to provide information about
school activities, child’s behavior and academic progress. Non-custodial parents reported receiving information if they happened to visit the school to drop-off and pick-up a child before and after school or for another reason. Otherwise they relied on receiving a phone call from the child or the custodial parent. They were often deprived of school-to-home communication.

Schools may want to utilize different approaches to share information with non-custodial parents. For example, they could mail non-custodial parents student progress reports and other school information such as notes, invitations to activities and request for donations. A follow-up contact by the teacher or school may be warranted to ensure information gets to parents. Text messaging and other social media may be used to help inform parents of upcoming events. When teachers and schools have been made aware of separate living arrangements of parents, procedures should be in place for both parents to receive information.

Parents reported feeling welcome when they walked into the school building by the pleasantness of staff, which included greetings, smiling faces and receiving handshakes. Parents felt welcomed to visit the school and classroom at any time. Unlike other research which identifies a welcoming environment being dependent on signage and the physical attractiveness of the building (Lopez et al. 2001; Mapp, 2002), this research suggests that school personnel understand the concept of welcoming as an attitude and that should be demonstrated toward parents. One parent stated:

I just don’t want to think of her as someone that’s just teaching my kid and that’s it. She’s really concerned with our child’s education-- her attitude, her conduct, just everything. I appreciate it. I feel really comfortable having her as a teacher for my child (Israel, Personal Communication, August 30, 2010).
Sam stated:

She (the teacher) made me feel comfortable watching her and noticing “she would do some things that I would do as a parent.” I was paying attention to her (the teacher), it made me comfortable to see that a teacher was concerned because we don’t see a lot of concerned teachers like we used to see back in the day (Personal Communication, August 30, 2010).

Statements like these support the idea that this group of parents want more than written signage and procedures to denote a welcoming environment. They viewed positive day-to-day interactions between teacher and student as evidence of a positive climate. This group of African American parents also appreciated the relationships built between them and the teacher as a sign of positive climate in the building.

Once parents feel welcomed into the school building they need to know what types of activities support their child’s education. What does the teacher wants them to do with their child while at school and more importantly at home? Teachers need to provide clear directions and avenues for assistance of homework completion for African American parents.

Children spend far more time at home than they do at school. The hours the child is at home could lead to more instructional time if educators were willing to truly treat parents as partners in education by providing workshops and other supports to parents to assist them in being more purposeful and effective in the work they do at home with student. The parents need not become the teachers but extend the practice and strategies that have been done in the classroom to the home. By teaching parents “parent friendly” ideas and strategies to support school instruction at home, those hours spent at home with
the child might prove to be more effective in raising student achievement if that is the
aim of the school.

Overwhelmingly the teacher workforce is not representative of society. Teachers
are predominately Caucasian, young females often from rural settings (Davis et al.,
2005). However this does not mean that they can and should not relate to parents of
different backgrounds or ethnicities. Caucasian teachers that are teaching in
predominately African American schools, such as the case at Strathmore, should not
depend on their African American colleagues to develop relationships with families.
Every teacher is capable of making welcoming relationships with parents no matter the
ethnicity. Relationships can cross color lines.

Implications for Schools

After the relationship with teachers, this group of parents reported the
significance of the building principal leading the way for positive school climate and
relationship building. School administrators set the tone for parent involvement practices
in their buildings. This group of parents, made it clear it was not what the administrator
said but how she interacted with parents and staff that signified a welcoming environment
and a positive climate.

Schools may want to consider professional development for staff on the topic of
building relationships. Relationships supported parent involvement at Strathmore. When
a relationship is established between the parent and teacher, information sharing is
automatic. The teacher and parent can both share information freely with each other for
the benefit of the child. Planning for African American parents to become initially
acquainted at the beginning of a new school year or grade level with their teacher would also be beneficial for schools as relationships were important to this group of parents.

Parent reports of good teacher relationships at Strathmore were not dependent on the ethnicity of the teacher. School districts serving high numbers of students that are African American and having a teaching staff that is not reflective of the students’ backgrounds should consider recruiting a teacher workforce that is reflective of the students they serve. If recruitment is not an option to hire a diverse teaching staff, consideration should be given to developing their own diverse teaching staff. One example might be grow-your-own teacher pre-service programs where districts partner with a local college or university to provide on-site courses and other accommodations to suite the district’s needs in developing a diverse teaching pool.

Parents in this study also reported that family relationships assisted in their decision about whether or not to become involved. There was evidence of extended family involvement in the child’s education. If teachers knew the importance of extended family relationships in certain cultures and how to build those relationships as well children may experience better academic outcomes. Professional development on relationship building would be cost effective when considering the budgetary amounts involved in implementing national parent involvement initiatives.

Utilizing unconventional methods to communicate about school events, programs, student progress and other building related activities may be beneficial to parents. Home letters in backpacks, as one parent pointed out, may or may not reach the parent. However new technology, social media, in the form of text messaging, Twitter™ and
Facebook™ may be vehicles to reach both custodial and non-custodial parents as well as other family members involved in the child’s education.

Schools may want to consider parents in decision making opportunities in considering building programs, activities and times for events. Here again the school may want to get creative or use technology in soliciting parent input as parents may not attend parent organizational meetings, which is the usual vehicle to solicit parent input into building practices. Because parents reported responding well to child invitations, enlisting children to invite parents to become involved in the parent organization at school may prove to foster parent attendance. Schools must also make clear connections between the benefits of participating in a parent decision making group and the direct benefits that those decisions have on the entire student population as well as the individual child. Parents were committed and engaged in activities that directly impacted their child.

Strathmore was a deviant case in parent participation. The school parent-teacher conferences attendance was higher than the national average. However, student achievement is still an issue at the school with less than 50% of the student proficient in math and reading. Parent involvement is thought to be a variable in student achievement. Strathmore like many urban elementary schools is experiencing a lack of achievement amongst its students and could benefit from finding out what types of parental involvement activities raise student achievement. Schools need to be clear about their ideas for educating children and how to incorporate parent involvement.
Implications for Teacher Education

Teachers are predominately young, Caucasian and female (Davis et al., 2005). Teacher education programs must include cultural competency courses that allow students to learn and investigate other cultural norms, expectations and behaviors in relation to education. Teacher education programs require students to student teach before graduating. Expanding the student teaching experience to cover full participation in parent-teacher conferences to prepare pre-service teachers in the development of relationship building skills would be beneficial to schools.

Colleges and universities located within miles of urban cities should consider strategic marketing and recruitment efforts to lure potential African American students into teaching majors. This would entail establishing relationships with the urban community including the school district as well as other entities in the community. The university along with other community stakeholders could create dialog that would identify overtime a diverse pre-service candidate pool that would attend the university in pursuit of a teaching degree. The teaching structure, course offerings, and location may have to change to better suit the needs of urban students. These considerations would lessen barriers to recruitment and retention.

Pre-service teacher education programs that offer field placements or when developing teaching practicums should consider parent teacher relationships and how students might get the opportunity to interact with different groups of parents before graduation. Implementing expectations that pre-service teachers conduct a set number of parent teacher conferences, complete a home visit or attend a school sanctioned parent
night, all under the supervision of a teacher, would enhance teacher preparation programs by introducing per-service teachers to potential differences they might encounter on the job.

Implications for Future Research

Parent involvement is valuable in the education of children. This research did not address parent involvement as it relates to student achievement. Future research should focus on specific activities or practices parents can do with their child to increase achievement. Parent involvement can be high and student achievement low. Future research should focus on what types of involvement yield higher achievement for students. A longitudinal study with parents that have differing levels of involvement, while tracking student test scores over a period of time could yield specific parent involvement activities that impact achievement.

This research was limited to eight African American parents with children attending a middle-size urban school in the Midwestern United States. A larger-scale study on African American parental involvement would yield more conclusive results and recommendations. These results are intended to further the discussion on African American parent involvement.

This particular research was a deviant case where all parents were members of the same school and reported a good experience, contrasting with what current literature would suggest African American parents would experience. This group of parents indicated that their involvement was a requirement of their background. If the school was not as welcoming and responsive the parents may have chosen to discharge their
involvement and become more involved at home rather than participating as much as they did in school activities. To gain further insight, research should be conducted at a predominately African American school where relationships are not as positive to gather narratives from those parents. Their stories may be different and would further add to the conversation on what motivates African American parents to become involved in their child’s education.

National parent involvement programs have costs beyond the budgets of many school districts. However further research is warranted on the benefits of certain components of parent involvement such as how to involve parents in decision-making at the building level, something Strathmore parents did not do. More research on parent involvement by ethnicity may yield specific strategies that could be implemented with certain populations at a fraction of the budget and time it would take to implement a national parent involvement program.

For this group of African American parents results indicated that past school experience was not an indicator of their involvement. In fact, parents became involved based on a belief that their child would have a better future. Parents viewed their participation as a requirement or a fulfillment of being a parent. Further research on parental role construction may yield more conclusive evidence that supports this finding as it relates to motivation and beliefs.

This group of parents had high parental involvement with a school that gave highly welcoming responses to their involvement. Future research should look at schools that have a low welcoming response to parent involvement and parents with low
involvement. Future research at schools with high welcoming responses to parent involvement and low parent involvement is needed. These types of research designs would allow more generalizable results and inform schools on practices that could be implemented to increase parent participation with low involved parents and inform schools that have low responses to parent participation. Different levels of involvement and different levels of school receptiveness would yield results to fit more situations.

The parents of this study, responding to a public notice, took the initiative to voluntarily contact the researcher. Recruitment for studies of greater magnitude would require a larger participation sample and more aggressive recruitment techniques.

This group of parents did see the value in community. Community was defined by this group as family, friends, elders, co-workers, beauty shop patrons and the church. In the past the relationship between families and the African American church was different from how the parents in this study described their relationships—or failed to even mention (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Further inquiry into this relationship in comparison to the historical experience might also be worth investigating.

This study was from the parents' perspective of their involvement. Further research should focus on parent involvement from the teacher's perspective. Do teachers at this school perceive these parents, or a larger group of the parents being as involved as reported? What areas of parent involvement are beneficial to them as teachers? This research although limited in scope, adds to the conversation about the experiences of different groups of parents interacting and involving themselves in their child's
education. More research is needed on different groups of parents to determine best practices for parent involvement that will benefit the parent, teacher, school and child.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

TELEPHONE SCRIPT

Hello my name is Charletta Sudduth a doctoral student at the University of Northern Iowa. I am hoping to record the personal stories of African American parent's involvement in their child's education. The interview will take from about 60 to 90 minutes to complete. It is completely voluntary. I can arrange a time to come to your home, if that would be convenient? If not, would there be another location convenient for us to meet? If so, when would you like to do this? What is your/the address? Would it be okay for me to use a tape recorder or would you rather have me write it down? Thanks see you then.
Our Voices: Narratives of African American parental involvement in their child's education.

This is a formal invitation for you to take part in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

The purpose of this study is to obtain personal narratives from African American parents to capture the nature of their involvement in their child’s education from their own perspective. The researcher seeks to understand what motivates African American parents to become involved in their child’s education, explore what parental role construction guides African American parental involvement in their child’s education, and to describe how African American parents perceive teacher, child and school invitations for their involvement in their child’s education.

There are no direct benefits provided for your participation in the study. Your story will be kept confidential. This means no identifying information about you or your child will be published in a research or academic publications or anywhere else.

There should be limited risks in telling your story. The risks are similar to those that happen in the course of regular conversation. I would like to use these stories to capture the nature of African American parent involvement in their child’s education. Confidential excerpts from your story may be used in research publications.

Your participation is completely voluntary so you may withdraw at any time or choose not to participate at all. If you have questions about the study or desire future information you may contact my advisor Dr. Linda Fitzgerald at 319-273-2214 at the University of Northern Iowa, Department of Education. You may also contact Anita Gordon at 319-273-3217 at the University of Northern Iowa, Office of Research Services and Special Programs, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.

I agree and I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I
acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent and that I am 18 years of age or older.

(Signature of participant) (Date)

(Printed name of participant) (Date)

(Signature of investigator) (Date)

In case the investigator wants to tape record the interview, do you agree to this? Yes or No (Circle a response)

Would you prefer the interview be recorded through note taking? Yes or No (Circle a response)

(Signature of participant) (Date)
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What Grade is your child in?

2. What types of activities do you perform at home with your child to support the learning occurring in the classroom? How often? How Many hours per week?

3. What other activities do you engage in to prepare your child for school?

4. How often do you visit with your child’s teacher?

5. Do you feel comfortable with your child’s teacher?

6. What does he or she do that makes you feel comfortable or uncomfortable?

7. What has your experience been with the principal or other school staff?

8. Do you seek outside assistance to help you with your child or child’s homework?


10. Does anyone else in the home assists with the child?

11. How will your involvement make a difference in your child’s educational future?

12. What personal experience(s) have prepared you to be involved in your child’s education both at home and at school?

13. What activities, programs, or groups do you attend at school?

14. Does your child ask or invite you to become involved in home work or school activities?

15. What type of activities do you attend?

16. Does the teacher invite you to participate in your child’s education? How?

17. In what ways are you informed of school parent events or activities?
18. In what ways do you feel welcome to participate?

19. Is there anything else you would like to share about your involvement with your child, school or teacher?
APPENDIX D
RECRUITMENT FLIER

Looking for African American parents, caretakers, or guardians with a child in kindergarten through 5\textsuperscript{th} grade to participate in a Parent Involvement research study.

The purpose of this research is to:

- to understand what motivates African American parents to become involved in their child’s education
- to explore how African American parental involvement in their child’s education is decided
- to describe how African American parents perceive invitations to parental involvement in their child’s education.

If you are interested please contact, Charletta, doctoral student at 319-504-1570 to inquire. All information will be kept confidential. Thanks for your consideration.