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Influence of Parental Involvement on Students' Success in Title I Charter School in Texas as Perceived by Middle School Principals

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Research has shown a positive correlation between parental involvement and student' achievement (Martin, 2015). According to Batista (2009), any factors that help to increase students' achievement should be seriously considered in an effort to meet the demand for higher achievement and improve successful school systems. LaFolette (2014) argued that quality parental involvement is one of the key factors increasing student achievement and has become a vital and essential element in school improvement efforts. Harris and Goodall (2008) claimed that parental involvement is one of the most effective school improvement strategies and increases student' success at schools.

Since educators in state and federal government want to improve schools and the nation's report card, principals have a crucial responsibility to ensure their students are successful (Schubert, 2010). Yet, as students move into middle and high school parental involvement significantly decreases (Burke, 2006; Hartas, 2014). Archibald, Grabber, and Brooks-Gunn (2008) suggested that the biological and social changes young adults experience starting in their middle school years influence their academic motivation. Thus, parental involvement becomes more important during early adolescence. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) posited that parents' and educators' aims differ on parental involvement, student success, and the role of parents. In addition, Bower and Griffin (2011) indicated that educators have not clearly defined or understood the forms of parental involvement in middle school, resulting in low parental involvement and low student achievement.

The National Alliance of Public Charter School (NAPCS) (2017a) defines charter schools as schools that are open enrolled tuition-free public schools, run privately and funded by the state. Charter schools are a new concept to the public education system and operate under a performance contract or charter that lets them be innovative and flexible. The number of charter schools has reached over 6,900 nationwide, serving more than three million students in the United States during the 2016-17 school year. Charter schools serve mostly minority populations (NAPCS, 2017) and will continue to grow in Texas as well.

Schubert (2010) argued that principals are the leaders of the school setting the tone of the school culture and of daily interactions with parents and the community in a variety of ways.

Their perspectives on parental involvement set the expectation and serve as an important model for the staff and teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological narrative study was to explore the influence of parental involvement on students' success in Title I charter schools in Texas as perceived by middle school principals.

What We Know about Parental Involvement

Concerns about lack of parental involvement have been an issue in US schools (Fishman & Nickerson, 2015; Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2010; White, 2007). Historically, educators and public officials have raised concerns about lack of parental involvement in schools (Watson, Sanders-Lawson, & McNeal, 2012). Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008) argued that children's educational success relies on the support both parents and teachers received to develop positive interpersonal relationships with children. Barnyak and McNelly (2009) emphasized that school leaders should create a strong partnership with parents and a promising atmosphere for students' learning and parental involvement to improve school success. In addition, Schubert (2010) suggested that principals play a crucial role in effectiveness and continued partnerships with parents in school. Cox-Petersen (2011) asserted, "Partnerships are necessary to obtain high educational achievement for all students – regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, family make-up, or ethnic group" (p. 16).

Historically, school administrators and teachers have voiced concerns about parental involvement in their schools, especially as it pertains to the academic, psychological, and physiological welfare of children (Watson et al., 2012). Parental involvement and its influence on children's education have received more attention with the worldwide changes in politics, history, and the economy (Radisic, 2010). Gordon and Seashore-Louis (2009) argued that school leaders need to make more holistic and authentic efforts to address the issues in their community to increase the level of school success.

The success of the students' academic achievement correlates with the ability of principals to navigate the needs of the community. Fuligni and Fuligni (2007) argued that in addition to principals' leadership ability, another factor that influences students' success is parent involvement. Warren (2010) noted that many research studies have revealed that parental involvement increases student success. Thus, having partnerships and effective communication with families is crucial for schools. As the school climate becomes more parent-friendly (Hornby, 2000), parents become more engaged and feel comfortable becoming involved in school events. According to the US Department of Education (2011), parental involvement becomes more important in Title I schools since they generally are lower performing and of lower socio-economic status with less parental involvement and are required to create parental involvement plans and provide academic support to low-income students identified as academically behind or at risk of failing to increase student achievement.

The principal is key in creating a parent-friendly school environment (Epstein & Rodriguez-Jansorn, 2004) and implementing a leadership style that allows parents opportunities to be heard (Stelmach & Preston, 2008). Batista (2009) claimed that principals are the primary component of implementing parental involvement strategies in schools and that they must be aware of the impact of attitudes as they communicate the objective. Scanlan (2010) suggested

that strong school-home communication, principals' personal attention towards parental involvement, and the strategies they implement in their schools reduce the barriers toward parental involvement.

The role of the principal has been redefined which includes expectations for nurturing effective relationships with parents and provide a school atmosphere where parents feel valued and important (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009). Rapp and Duncan (2012) suggested that principals are the key component of students' academic success by establishing a school culture that values parental involvement.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological narrative study was to explore the influence of parental involvement on students' success in Title I charter schools in Texas as perceived by middle school principals. The following questions guided the study:
1. What are the most effective practices principals implement regarding parental involvement?
2. What challenges do principals encounter regarding parental involvement and how can these be overcome?

A phenomenological narrative research approach was employed to collect and analyze all participants' perceptions on parental involvement in this study, with a focus on the investigation of the common perceptions of principals. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants for this study (Creswell, 2009). A sample of 10 middle school principals of Title I charter schools in Texas who had served at least one full year as a principal in his/her current school or had previously served as a principal at least one full year at another Title I charter school with grade sixth through eighth grade were interviewed. All principal names in this study are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Demographic information of participants is shown in Table 1, including school locations, grade levels served and school populations. All principals were located in urban areas of Texas from five different charter school districts.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Name	Ethnicity	Gender	School Location	Grade
Mrs. Shelly	White	F	Duncanville	K-8
Mr. Manfield	Asian-Indian	M	Cedar Hill	K-12
Mr. Clear	African-American	M	South Dallas	5-6
Mr. Alan	Asian	M	Arlington	K-12
Mrs. Katy	White	F	Grand Prairie	K-8
Mr. Bill	White	M	Waco	6-12
Mr. Gilbert	White	M	Garland	7-12
Mr. Dan	White	M	Austin	6-12
Mr. Arthur	White	M	Austin	6-12
Mr. Mark	White	M	Austin	K-8

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The researcher used convenience and snowball sampling in this study in addition to purposeful sampling. Creswell (2011) suggested that when the participants were willing to participate, the researcher could use convenience sampling. If convenience sampling is used, the researcher could use snowball sampling by asking participants to suggest new participants for the study. An invitation was extended first to all Title I middle school principals in Dallas Fort Worth, Texas. Principals who accepted the invitation were asked to suggest new principals until the expected number of participants had been reached. After reaching 10 participants, the researcher contacted them via an invitation letter sent by email to set the interview times and methods. Before the interview, the researcher collected consent to participate forms from each participant.

For this qualitative phenomenological study, Creswell's (2103) recommendations were used to structure the data, code the data, and represent the data. The researcher analyzed the data using the comparative method to identify themes after reading over all transcribed interviews. In each interview a "general sense of the information" (Creswell, 2009, p. 185) was considered to obtain the information. The most significant statements from each interview were recorded (Creswell, 2007) and organized into "chunks or segments" (Creswell, 2009, p. 186).

Discussion of Findings

This qualitative phenomenological narrative study explored the influence of parental involvement on students' success in Title I charter schools in Texas as perceived by middle school principals. Specific findings based on this study are discussed by the research questions.

Research Question One

The first question investigated effective practices and strategies principals have regarding parental involvement. Emergent themes included the following: open door policies, home visit programs, suggested activities at home, effective communication practices, parent-teacher communication routines, parent programs and activities, and involving parents in decision-making processes.

Open door policy. All 10 principals who participated in this study mentioned that having an open-door policy was an effective and important communication tool for principals. All charter school principals considered their parents either customers or partners or both. Therefore, they believed that being available for their customers or partners is very important to keep parents happy and satisfied and to maintain relationships at a high level.

Mr. Alan emphasized that having an open-door policy was very important to help parents get involved in school. An open-door policy meant that he was available for parents anytime they needed him, such as answering heir calls and being available to meet with parents when needed.

Mr. Gilbert said that having a school-wide open-door policy provided a consensus among teachers that said, "parents come first." Mr. Clear highlighted that an open-door policy would

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work as long as principals communicate it to parents. He said it would tell parents "I am approachable, do not hesitate to contact me."

Home visit program. Seven of the 10 principals mentioned that they conduct home visits with their parents and students throughout the year. The other three principals acknowledged that, if they had such a program, it would increase the parental involvement.

Mr. Bill explained that the home visit creates an opportunity to provide information about upcoming events, school expectations and to get feedback from parents. Mr. Allan said that even though they had been offering different activities at the school for parents there were still parents that would not come to any of them. He said, "At this point, our home visit program helps us to reach out the other parents." While he acknowledged that conducting home visit was not easy since it is done either after school or over the weekend, each year more of his teachers participated in the program. He emphasized that it is direct communication in an "unofficial" setting.

Mr. Gilbert stated that as a part of their communication efforts, he had been promoting a home visit program at his school. Mr. Dan said that when he started the home visit program a few years ago because only a few teachers participated. However, for the past two years teachers have received an incentive per home visit, which helped him to have more teachers participate in the program.

Suggested activities at home. All 10 principals in this study agreed that parents should be involved in children's education at home. The most common parental involvement activities that were expected; asking questions about school, checking homework, discussing any issue their children had in school and closely monitoring their children's academic and disciplinary progress by checking the student information system on their school websites.

Mr. Manfield emphasized that a great deal of parental involvement happens at home. He asks his parents to create an atmosphere conducive to studying at home, following children's progress, giving them a place to study, and emphasizing to their children the importance.

Mrs. Shelly provided her two best parental involvement activities which could be done at home:

Asking parents to make it a priority in their head, making it a discussion in their home every day of learning, looking at their child's assignment sheet every day, asking them if they've done their homework, checking to see if they've done their homework and two, having them understand that they don't know everything as a parent.

Effective communication practice. One of the emergent themes in this study was effective communication practices used by charter school principals. All 10 principals in this study emphasized that communication was vital both for school and for parents. Principals in this study stated that they communicated with their parents on a regular basis using multiple tools. For example, Mr. Dan mentioned that they communicated with their parents through emails, newsletters, using a school messenger system and organizing multiple events throughout the

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year. He realized that they needed to send hard copies of the newsletter or any announcements in a folder. He explained:

> I noticed that not all parents use emails very often or read the news from our websites. Therefore, we discussed that we should go back to old system and use parent envelopes or a folder system. We had a folder for each student, and we printed copies of all announcements and placed them in that folder. It was sent to parents every week on Wednesday, and by Friday students must have returned the envelope to their homeroom teachers after parents signed communication log on it.

Parent-teacher communication routines. All the principals in this study required their teachers to contact parents either weekly or biweekly through email, newsletter or face-to-face meeting. All schools had a certain number of parent teacher conferences scheduled throughout the year as well.

When principals asked to list when teachers communicate with parents, the first thing they listed was asking teachers to communicate when negative things happen in classrooms rather than positive things. For example, Mr. Shelly emphasized:

> Anytime they have an issue with lack of progress or if they see a pattern that they feel like needs to be corrected I encourage them to contact the parent. Anytime there is a behavioral issue, we contact the parent.

Parent programs and activities. Each principal who participated in this study mentioned that they offered a variety of parent activities based on their communities' needs. Seven of the ten principals had a parent teacher organization (PTO) at their school. A few of those principals preferred to call their parent organization something different. For example, Mrs. Shelly called it PAC, Parents Achieving Community, and she made every single parent a part of this community.

Parents in decision-making process. Six of the ten principals who participated in this study mentioned that they had a site-based decision-making committee consisting of parents, teachers, students and community members. Mrs. Shelly said that her decision-making committee met on an as-needed basis rather than meeting regularly throughout the year. She added, "This was a very effective way to involve parents and create ownership." She believed that having parent representatives in this committee enabled her to represent her school voice appropriately in district meetings.

Research Question Two

The second question investigated the challenges that middle school principals encounter on parental involvement and how they overcome these challenges. Emergent themes included the following: language barrier, parents' work schedules, not having up-to-date contact information, parents getting upset with rules and regulations, lack of knowledge on cultural awareness among teachers, parents' lack of time and family issues.

Language barrier. Four of the ten principals listed "language barrier" as their first challenge at their schools. For example, Mr. Arthur said that half of his parents were Hispanic with limited English and he had to have a translator in each meeting he had in school. Mr. Dan mentioned that having a high population of parents with limited or no English was another reason for low parental involvement in his school. He said that he hired bilingual secretaries in the front office to communicate with his parents.

Parent's work schedule. Parent work schedules and parents working multiple jobs were another challenge mentioned by all principals who participated in this study. Mr. Dan said:

> Since more than half of my students are coming from low-income families, their parents have different jobs to make money for living. Most of my parents have different jobs, multiple work places, and their schedule is not good for them to attend our meetings. We try to schedule our events on different times and dates, but it does not always help them to attend.

Not having up-to-date contact information. Mr. Gilbert mentioned that one of his biggest challenges was not having all teachers communicate with their parents on time. After saying that he added, "Most of the time it was because of not having the current contact information of parents." He said:

> A common problem at charter schools is parents don't update their current contact information and we can't reach them. When we mail the letters, they are returned by the post office because of wrong addresses. Or, when I email them, it will bounce back.

Parents get upset with rules and regulations. Four of the participants mentioned that parents do not understand the position of a charter school and see it as completely different from public schools, which leads them to request unreasonable things. When these requests are not fulfilled by school personnel, they get upset and keep their relationship with the school to a minimum. For example, Mr. Clear said:

> I know a lot of times parents want to ask me about another student's grades, or another student's home life, or what did this student do to get in trouble, or my child got in trouble so what are you going to do other child? Or they ask, "Can I bring a pizza for the entire lunch room?" Even though it is good to have a parent that would provide pizza to all students, you know that we just can't do that. Parents get upset and don't want to understand the regulations and wants to see the law. They think that it is my rule and it is me not letting them eat outside food in school.

Lack of knowledge on cultural awareness among teachers. Three of the participants mentioned that there is a lack of information about cultural awareness among teachers. Mr. Mark said:

> I have new and veteran teachers, but most of them have no idea about how to approach the needs of their students who come from different backgrounds. Home visit programs helped a lot to solve this problem, since they have seen the background behind some of

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their students' behavioral issues when they visited them at home. I also provided training to all of my staff about cultural awareness.

Lack of time. Seven of the participants mentioned that parents have difficulty finding time to stop by school. Most of the parents come only to drop their children off in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon. Mr. Manfield shared:

> Parents don't have time to stop by the school, schedule a meeting or even answer the call. So, I feel we should establish a system where we tell them what we are willing to do and what we expect from them and it has to be an ongoing process throughout the year.

Family issues. Nine of the participants stated that family issues such as being a single parent, having multiple jobs and financial concerns are common challenges that they encounter. For example, Mr. Manfield said:

> I think the parental involvement has got to do a lot with their financial situation, their social situation, their family situation and their own approach and attitude towards the whole thing. So, it is a process. If you take a little bit [of a] step back and watch those school districts that [are] not doing too well on parental involvement, you will find that a lot of them have family problems. Unless a family is stable themselves, you know, how are they going to be involved in other things?

Conclusions and Implications

This study investigated the influence of parental involvement on students' success in Title I charter schools in Texas as perceived by middle school principals. The number of charter schools has reached over 6,900 nationwide, serving more than three million students in the United States during the 2016-17 school year (NAPCS, 2017a). According to NAPCS (2017b), charter schools serve mostly minority populations and will continue to grow in Texas as well.

The findings from this study affirm the conclusion that all principals strongly believe parental involvement influences students' success (Harris & Goodall, 2008; LaFolette, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2004; Warren, 2010). Principals believe that visibility is important in positively impacting parental involvement at the school. This visibility creates a welcoming atmosphere for parents (Epstein, 2010; Bauch & Goldring, 2000; Gibbs & Slate, 2003).

Research findings from this study suggest that these principals go above and beyond expectations to create meaningful programs and opportunities such as conducting home visits to increase parental involvement. The principals in this study emphasized that parental involvement should continue at home by asking question about school, checking homework, discussing any issue they had in school, closely monitoring their children's academic and disciplinary progress by checking the student information system on their school websites and sharing their expectations and goals with their kids (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2007; Patel & Stevens, 2010).

Effective communication and using a variety of communication tools are important in decreasing miscommunication between parents and schools. The findings in this study also lead

to the conclusion that principals understood the importance of communication by implementing different strategies to create an open line of communication between parents and schools. In addition to using regular email communication or sending newsletters, most of the principals in this study utilized social media accounts like Facebook or Twitter, smart applications like Remind101, school messenger and even home visit programs (Arnold, Perry, Watson, Minatra, & Swartz, 2006).

The findings from this study revealed that language barriers, parents' work schedules, not having up-to-date contact information, parents getting upset with rules and regulations, lack of time, lack of knowledge among teachers and family issues were the most common challenges that principals encountered (Hill & Tyson, 2009; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). Research findings suggest that principals implemented different strategies to overcome these problems such as hiring bilingual staff, providing translators at their meetings, having a phone system that provides translators in any language, and creating better schedules for parents by offering the events at multiple different times during the day and week (Michaela, 2006; Payne, 2006; Rapp & Duncan, 2012).

Thus, findings from this study suggest the conclusion that there is a need for principals to become familiar with their school population's needs for effective parental involvement. Educators would benefit from contacting parents earlier in the year and share their expectations and educate them about differences and similarities between charter schools and public schools. Also, there is a need for principals to have a more inclusive schedule by planning parent events on multiple different times based on parents' work schedule and provide childcare, transportation, translators and meal to increase parent involvement in school events.

Findings from this study lead to the conclusion that the principals should be more innovative and flexible to reach their parents. Schools are getting more diverse every day. School leaders, teachers and staff need training about socio-cultural context of diverse families and need to learn more about cross-cultural interaction to engage parents in schools.

The principals could increase parental involvement by being visible and available to their parents. There is a need for principals to look for up-to-date effective communication tools that implement current technology that are user friendly and social media used often by parents to keep them aware. They also use current technology and social media to reach out their parents.

There is a need to provide the best school environment not only for students but also for parents. Demand for charter schools will continue to grow across the nation. While having more charter schools, it is important to know what charter school principals are doing on their campuses to support parental involvement, which in turn means more successful charter schools.

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