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# Parent Involvement in Schools: Views from School Social Workers

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Parent Involvement in Schools:  
Views from School Social Workers

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review board, implement the project and publicly present the findings of the study.

This project is neither a Master's Thesis nor a dissertation.

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine school social workers' beliefs related to parent involvement in schools as well as their perceptions of the part social workers play in facilitating engagement and mediating conflicts between parents, schools, communities, and education related policies. Given the potential for school social workers to develop and strengthen family-school connections, it is critical to understand how they view their role in this process. Three questions guided this research: 1) How do school social workers assess the importance of parent involvement in school? 2) Do school social workers believe they have a role to play in parent involvement? 3) Do school social workers believe they have a role in mediating tensions that arise from conflicts between systems and stakeholders (school staff, parents, the broader community and macro-level policy)? The research design was qualitative and exploratory, incorporating elements of ethnographic data collection and grounded theory analysis. Participants responded to a series of open-ended questions intended to elicit their views on the role of parents in their children's formal education, barriers to parent involvement, and on how school social workers participate in parent engagement efforts. Analysis of the data revealed several salient themes. These themes included definitions of parent involvement, barriers to parent involvement and the role of school social worker in overcoming those barriers. This study adds to the research on the role of social workers in facilitating parent engagement in schools.

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### Parent Involvement in Schools: Views from School Social Workers

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2001, more commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), mandated several reforms in education. At its initiation NCLB was hailed as a landmark in efforts to transform public schools. In 2011, Congress reauthorized the law keeping intact many of the key provisions of the original legislation. One of the most significant mandates in the law relates to parent involvement in their children's education. Specifically, NCLB calls for "shared accountability between schools and parents, expanded public school choice and supplemental educational services, parental involvement plans with sufficient flexibility to address local needs, and building parents' capacity for using effective practices." (US Department of Education, 2004, p. 1). To accommodate the expanded role of parents, schools have had to make many operational changes. They have had to open previously closed records about student and teacher performance, include parents in planning for academic and behavioral interventions, allow for parent input in school governance, and ensure parents have full access to due-process proceedings for children facing disciplinary action. Moreover, schools have had to develop better ways to attract parents to school programs and to encourage parents to take an active role in their children's educational activities (Cavanagh, 2012).

Unlike earlier versions of the ESEA, NCLB defines what is meant by parent engagement in schools and prescribes what school districts must do to facilitate parents' involvement in their children's education. While parental involvement has long been part of the ESEA, NCLB provided a specific statutory definition (US Department of Education,

2004, p. 3). Put succinctly, the law defines parent involvement in four ways: 1) assisting in their children's learning at home; 2) engaging in their children's education at school; 3) partnering with schools to make decisions and to serve as advisors; and 4) participating in home and school activities that support formal learning (US Department of Education, 2004, p. 3). Requirements for school districts follow from the ways parent involvement is defined. These requirements include: 1) involving parents in developing district school improvement plans; 2) offering assistance to schools to plan and implement parent involvement activities with the goal of improving academic performance; 3) helping to build school communities that support strong parent involvement; 4) coordinating and integrating parent involvement with community based programs like Head Start and Reading First; 5) conducting annual evaluations of policy and programming effectiveness (NCLB Action Briefs, 2004 in Finch, 2010).

The compliance sections of NCLB specify that school districts that do not meet parent involvement requirements may be ineligible for Title I funding (Finch, 2010, p. 111). This source of funding is critical for school districts which serve high numbers of children in poverty, children with disabilities, and children whose home language is not English. Schools that receive Title I funding have additional requirements that include jointly developing a parent involvement plan with parents of Title I children and ensuring information is communicated in parents' home language. Schools must also publicize parent involvement policies in the broader community and hold frequent meetings to update parents on parent involvement policies and programming. Moreover, school districts must maintain frequent and timely communication and develop systems for responding to parent questions and concerns (NCLB Action Briefs, 2004 in Finch, 2010). Finally, the law specifies that

districts spend at least 1% of Title I funds for parent engagement programming (Cavanagh, 2012, p. 1).

The extensive NCLB requirements related to parent involvement are based on long standing research that shows a positive association between parent involvement and student achievement (US Department of Education, 2004, p 4). Both empirical and ethnographic studies consistently show a strong, positive relationship between parent engagement and educational outcomes for children (Bracke & Cortis, 2011; Fan & Chen, 2001; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski & Apostoleris, 1997; Lorea, Rueda & Nakamoto, 2011; Ruiz, 2009). These findings appear consistent across socio-economic, ethnic, and racial groups (Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Lorea, et al., 2011; Ruiz, 2009; Suarez-Orozco, 2010).

Yet, while there is widespread support for parent involvement in schools, there are many barriers to participation. In addition, there is lack of consensus on what constitutes parent involvement and on how to identify and ease barriers. For the purposes of this paper, parent involvement – also referred to as parent engagement - is broadly defined as the values, beliefs, and practices of parents related to their children’s education in school. Barriers are defined as the actual or perceived impediments that keep parents from participating in their children’s formal education. These barriers may include institutional conflicts over power and roles, as when administrators or teachers assume authority for all educational decisions, and barriers that are created by socioeconomic and cultural differences between school and home. Some barriers involve logistical issues, like transportation and job schedules, while other barriers are broader, involving macro-level educational policies. A critical macro-level barrier to parent engagement is contained within the NCLB Act itself. While the Act



mandates parent engagement, it does not contain specific enforcement provisions, which means that schools that do not comply with NCLB parent engagement requirements are rarely sanctioned (NCLB Action Briefs, 2004 in Finch, 2010). Superintendents and principals often take other requirements of NCLB (like testing and teacher evaluation) more seriously, relegating parent engagement to lower priority (Cavanagh, 2012). In fact, meeting NCLB Title I requirements for parental involvement has been documented as a significant area of NCLB non-compliance (Cavanagh, 2012, p. 3).

The multiple barriers to parent involvement have led to mixed reactions to NCLB reforms. Reactions range from ambivalence and confusion to anger and activism among different school constituencies. Because NCLB provides little guidance on how to implement parent engagement programs, these programs often lack direction and are treated as an “add-on” rather than as an integral part of school culture and operations (Cavanagh, 2012, p. 2). Despite its support for other parts of NCLB, the Obama administration has strongly criticized parent engagement requirements included in the original law. A representative from the US Department of Education characterized approaches to parent engagement as “fragmented and non-strategic” often reduced to “random acts of family involvement” rather than meaningful efforts to partner with parents (Cavanagh, 2012, p. 2). National advocacy groups that have studied the effectiveness of parent engagement efforts have found widespread dissatisfaction. Parents and parent advocates argue that despite “lip service to parent involvement,” families and communities are mostly left out of meaningful school reform (Public Education Network, 2007, p. 7). Parent engagement is often featured in school district policy and planning, yet the policy has little relevance if parents are not

included in decision-making or if parent engagement is not considered important to the school's mission (Public Education Network, 2007, p. 8).

The failure of NCLB to create lasting reform in public education has led to widespread criticism of the law. Yet, despite its many shortfalls, NCLB has encouraged schools to innovate in ways they might not have without the law's mandates. Before NCLB, school culture was typically stratified so that, simply put, school professionals were responsible for formal education while parents were responsible for making sure their children showed up at school. This strict separation of roles often led to tension between parents and schools with each side blaming one another for failing to follow through on their responsibilities. Rather than being seen as partners, parents were often cast as adversaries and school professionals as unwilling to yield their power. NCLB has not eased this tension entirely, but it has created opportunities for meaningful interaction between families and schools. NCLB at least has the potential for bringing previously "excluded stakeholders", like parents and community members, into education (Howard & Reynolds, 2008, p. 79). If the ultimate goal of NCLB is achievement for all students, it is imperative to bring as many concerned people as possible into the process.

Just as there are barriers to parent involvement, there also ways schools can and do support that involvement. The research literature points to initiatives that are designed to ease the barriers identified above and to promote more participation among parents (Alameda-Lawson, Lawson & Lawson, 2010; Auerbach, 2010; Blitz, Kida, Gersham, & Bronstein, 2013; Greenberg, 2012; Randolph, Teasley & Arrington, 2006). Many of these efforts begin with the recognition that to support student achievement schools and parents need to work from a common agenda. The process of creating a common agenda should

encourage all stakeholders – students, parents, school professionals, policy makers, and the broader community – to give voice to their interests, values, and aspirations (Auerbach, 2010; Bracke & Corts, 2008). This process, however unwieldy, holds promise for making a meaningful investment towards the goal of improving education for all children. This investment, leading to action, is critical to reforming education.

Because they have a unique role in schools, social workers are well-situated to facilitate the process of creating a common agenda. Given their skills in mediation and their orientation to systems, social workers can lead school efforts to promote collaboration between school and home. In their role as liaison between students, parents, teachers, school administrators and the broader community, social workers can work to ease conflicting interests and encourage progress towards common goals. As professionals trained to see individual issues in a broader context, social workers can ensure that schools listen to and validate the beliefs, values, and practices of parents and that parents are empowered to be effective advocates for their children’s formal education. This study explores the views of school social workers to better understand how they view the role of parents in schools. It further examines how social workers conceptualize both the barriers to parent involvement and whether or not they have a role in easing barriers and creating meaningful opportunities for parents to be involved in schools.

## **Literature Review**

### **Parent Involvement and Success in School**

Research supports a strong connection between parent involvement in schooling and student academic achievement. Studies in diverse fields confirm the widely held belief that

the more parents are involved in their children's education, the better the outcome. Specifically, these studies find that student achievement improves when parents directly support positive school behaviors like regular attendance, homework completion, and preparation for the classroom as well as when parents participate in school-sponsored programming, when they take meaningful advising and decision making roles in school policy, and when they orient their children to the value of formal education (Bracke & Cortes, 2008, Fan & Chen, 2001; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski & Apostoleris, 1997; Jeynes, 2005; Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichacha, 2001; Lorea, Rueda & Nakamoto, 2011; Randolph, Teasley & Arrington, 2006; Ruiz, 2009). According to Randolph, et al. (2006), students of parents who are actively involved have fewer discipline problems, attain better grades, have higher educational goals, and are more likely to complete high school. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) found that parent involvement was positively associated with children's motivation to achieve academically. They found that parents who characterized themselves as engaged had children who were more motivated and who felt more competent in school. High motivation, in turn, predicted high grades and this success reinforced feelings of competence and self-efficacy. Based on a review of relevant literature, Bracke and Corte (2008) argue that "it is not an overstatement to suggest that when parents 'show up', they have the enormous potential to positively impact the intellectual, emotional, and physical development of their children, school and community" (p. 189). This association between parent participation and student achievement has been found across race and ethnicity (Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Greenberg, 2013; Lorea, et al., 2011; Ruiz, 2009; Suarez-Orozco, et. al., 2010).

As is seen in the discussion of NCLB and research outlined above, policy makers and educational theorists rely on research which generally confirms the importance of parent involvement in education yet, as with most received wisdom, a direct association between these complex variables is misleading. Findings from some studies complicate a superficial connection between parent engagement and success in school. Domina (2005) found differences in the association between parent involvement and student outcomes across socioeconomic groups. She argues that some efforts to involve parents may even be counterproductive, leading to no change or decline in parent-school interaction and student achievement. Other studies have found that for some groups, traditional forms of parent involvement show no benefit to students and lead to increased tensions between schools and parents (Almeda-Lawson, Lawson & Lawson, 2010; Auerbach, 2010; Blitz, Kida, Gersham, & Bronstein, 2013; Greenberg, 2012; Jeynes, 2010). Auerbach (2010) asserts that parent involvement is “critically shaped by race, class, gender, culture and language, as well as by the schools’ response to diverse families and power differentials” (p. 730). In other words, parent involvement efforts that work in one context may or may not work in another. For this reason, a simple connection between parent involvement and school success is difficult to establish.

### **Defining Parent Involvement**

A further complication in studying parent involvement is that while most research supports the belief that parent engagement, in one form or another, is beneficial for students, hardly anyone agrees on what is meant by the term. Bracke and Corte (2008) contend that the most significant obstacle to studying parent involvement is defining the construct (p.191). According to Grolnick, et.al. (1997), there is a “growing consensus” that parent involvement

is not a “unitary phenomenon”, but rather a “multidimensional” concept that takes into account parents’ beliefs, values, and actions related to education (p. 538). The lack of agreement on how to define, study, intervene in or evaluate parent engagement has the effect of creating tension between various stakeholders who often end up working at cross purposes, complicating or undermining one another’s good faith efforts at meeting educational goals.

Traditionally, parent involvement is categorized in two ways: 1) direct involvement in educational activity and 2) participation in school programming. The first category of parent involvement includes supporting homework, supplementing school-based educational materials, paying fees for extra-curricular activities, communicating with teachers, collaborating on individualized education plans (IEPs), and ensuring children attend school regularly. Within the second category are opportunities for parents to attend student performances and other special school activities, providing access to educational resources, and participating in teacher-parent organizations (Lynn & McKay, 2001; Randolph, et al., 2006).

Some researchers, however, have challenged the assumptions which inform these categories. Grolnick, et.al. (1997) expand conventional categories of parent involvement from two domains to three to incorporate parent behavior, cognitive-intellectual engagement, and personal interaction. Behavior, they explain, includes more traditional types of parent involvement including participation in school-based activities and helping with homework. Cognitive-intellectual involvement refers to providing enriching experiences like visiting the library and following current events. Finally, personal involvement includes interacting with teachers and keeping track of what is happening in the classroom (p. 538-9). Action in each

of these domains is complicated by contextual variables which include parent-child relationships, family resources, and the attitudes of school personnel towards parent involvement. The authors conclude that parent involvement in schools involves a complex interplay of people and systems (p. 547).

Thinking beyond traditional concepts of what it means for parents to be involved in schools has allowed researchers to reframe their research agenda. In response to a school district's concern about lack of parent involvement, Bracke and Corte (2008) led a study to explore the reasons parents in the district resisted parent engagement initiatives. The goal of the study was to identify how parents and teachers defined engagement, then to develop interventions that encouraged parent participation and eased participation barriers. The researchers began with the question "Why don't more parents participate in their child's education?", but as the study progressed, they revised the question and broadened their conceptual framework. The research question eventually became "How does the educational system discourage the sort of involvement parents want or expect?" Rather than narrowly define parent involvement according to traditional categories, Bracke and Corte closely examined the ways parents engaged and disengaged from school in order to inform interventions that addressed the "attitudes, beliefs, and expectations" that parents brought to the process (p. 194). In their view, parents should not bear the burden of figuring out how to be involved, but rather schools should reach out to parents on their terms, designing programs that allow parents to be involved in ways that make sense to them. The commitment to meeting parents on their own terms is consistent with principles of social work practice as prescribed in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics (NASW, 2008)

The research literature provides insight into how parents articulate the role they expect to take in their children's formal education. Parent expectations often have less to do with behavior and more to do with the values that they seek to instill in their children. Instead of specifying a "laundry list of things good parents do for their children", Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George (2004) propose the Ecologies of Parental Engagement (EPE) framework, which captures the more nuanced ways parents support their children's learning as well as the ways schools both facilitate and suppress all types of parent involvement. Similarly, using narratives from three working-class immigrant parents, Carreon, Drake & Barton (2005) describe the ways economically and culturally marginalized families participate in their children's formal education. The authors argue that the concept of parent involvement must not be confined to formal school spaces, nor need it even be school-centered, but rather it should be understood as a process that parents are actively part of constructing. Similarly, Jeynes (2010) examines meta-analyses of parent engagement that show the most salient aspects of parent involvement are subtle and not directly related to school. These include maintaining high expectations and expressing love, sensitivity and compassion (p. 748-749). Auerbach and Collier (2012) found that parents in their study believed the most meaningful contribution they made to their children's education was the transmission of mores, beliefs and values. This finding led the authors to suggest that the most effective school interventions validate family values and practices. They further conclude that home-based involvement has a greater influence on academic success than parent's visibility at school.



### **Barriers to Parent Involvement**

Parent involvement, as discussed in the previous section, refers to the many ways parents support their children's education. Education theory, legal mandate, and school-related policy all insist on parent-school partnership and yet, despite the attention given to parent engagement, there are still many barriers that prevent collaboration and work against shared interests. The literature identifies four types of barriers that are particularly salient: logistical, cultural, institutional and systemic. Logistical barriers are the easiest to define. These barriers relate to practical concerns, like transportation and the timing of school activities, which interfere with parent participation. Also included among these barriers are child-care obligations, financial issues, work schedules, proximity of school to home, and conflicts with the schedules of siblings or other family members. Many families on limited incomes are unable to provide materials and services, like internet access and college board test preparation, that are becoming increasingly important to academic achievement (Blitz, et.al., 2013; Greenberg, 2012). The most common barriers are in fact often the most obvious, like the inability to pay admission fees for school programs or to donate to school fundraisers. However simple, logistical barriers have a huge impact on parents' ability and willingness to engage in their children's schooling (Randolph, et al., 2006).

Cultural barriers refer to the problems many families have navigating the differences between their home culture and the culture of school. Discontinuities often exist between schools, which typically represent majority-culture practices and values, and the practices and values of linguistically, ethnically or socio-economically diverse groups. Suarez-Orozco, et al. (2010) suggests that some cultural barriers are based on misunderstanding while others are a result of conflicting values. For example, the Mexican immigrant families in Suarez-

Orozco, et. al.'s study indicated that they did not typically initiate communication with the school because they saw it as a form of disrespect. Similarly, they did not see it as their role to support their children's school-based activities directly, but rather to instill the value of hard work by modeling it themselves. For these families, hard work was highly valued, whether through participation in the workforce or in school. Cultural barriers are created when schools do not recognize the values and beliefs parents and children bring to school from home.

Olivos & Mendoza (2010) identify four constructs that "converge to constrict the opportunities" for culturally diverse families (p.339). Two of these constructs, language proficiency and immigration status, are relevant to the current discussion. Parents who do not speak English are restricted in their communication with teachers and do not have access to monolingual school programming. Moreover, parents who do not read the language of instruction are often unable to assist their children with homework (Auerbach, 2010; Carreron, et. al., 2005). Latino parents often cite their lack of English proficiency as the primary obstacle to involvement in their children's schooling (Greenberg, 2012). Although the parent involvement literature on non-Latino families is limited, it stands to reason that speakers from other language groups confront a similar obstacle. Immigration status further complicates parent-school relationships because school is associated with institutions that immigrants, particularly those with undocumented status, avoid for fear of negative legal consequences (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010, p. 350). Even though schools are obligated to enroll all students regardless of immigration status, immigrant parents' uneasiness about contact with bureaucracy and authority is a major barrier to involvement.

Institutional barriers are created when parents and schools have differing expectations for their respective roles. While NCLB requires schools to develop and enhance parent-involvement plans, school leaders, teachers and parents are often frustrated by the lack of clarity on how much influence parents can or should have on what schools do (Randolph, et al., 2006). Many agree that parents should have a greater role in school leadership and educational planning, but stake holders are often confused about the parameters of that involvement. Among other problems, institutional barriers create an unwelcome school atmosphere and reinforce parents' mistrust of school (Bracke & Corte, 2012). These barriers create tensions over the best course of action for educating diverse learners and conflict around teacher effectiveness (Ruiz, 2009). Moreover, institutional barriers reinforce stereotypes about certain parent groups and sustain inequality and power differences between individuals and institutions (Blitz, et. al. 2013; Bracke & Corte, 2012 ;Carreron, et. al.,2005; Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Lack of familiarity with the education system and incongruity between the needs of parents and the demands of school compound other institutional barriers resulting in greater confusion and tension (Greenberg, 2012; Howard & Reynolds, 2008).

Institutional barriers engender mistrust between parents and schools when schools feel parents have moved beyond their expected roles and parents feel schools are unresponsive to the needs and concerns they have for their children. Barriers are perpetuated when schools assume a "deficit model" of parent involvement which devalues parents' values and concerns (Carreon, et. al., 2005). Parent involvement from this lens privileges school's interests over the interests of parents, placing school in the position of power and authority. Related to the deficit view of parents is the myth that some parents, specifically the poor and other

marginalized groups, do not care about their children's education. From this perspective, schools must compensate for parents' lack of investment in their children by assuming authority over formal education (Blitz, et. al, 2013; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010; Valencia, 2002). Doucet (2011) argues that schools engage in rituals that orient parents to "cultural expectations regarding their place and the roles in schools" (p. 404). These rituals, he continues, "subsume parents into a dominant mainstream model of involvement." In Doucet's view attempts to acculturate "linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse" parents "to mainstream norms" are misguided and often unsuccessful (p. 404-405). The mainstream rituals of parent involvement reinforce the separation among parent groups and discourage many families from engaging in schools. Doucet urges schools to examine, and then broaden, practices to create solidarity between schools and families and to resist practices that create divisiveness and exclusion.

Systemic barriers are a final type of obstacle to parent involvement. Systemic barriers are caused by mezzo and macro-level actions that impact the functioning of schools. At the mezzo level, policy and culture at a given school directly influence the practices related to parent involvement at that institution. At the macro level, legislation created and regulated by the state and federal government, as well as local school boards, delineates the extent to which parents can be involved in decision-making. Decisions about curriculum, graduation requirements, educational standards, teacher qualifications, and school schedule are typically centralized, then given as mandates to individual schools. Schools make decisions about staffing, scheduling, extra-curricular offerings and the school environment without input from parents, even though those issues, like the policy-driven issues explained above, have a great influence on the functioning of a school. Research shows these systemic barriers can

cause frustration not only for parents, but also for schools, that would prefer more discretion in these impactful decisions (Randolph, et al., 2006).

Macro level forces impact institutions, like schools, that exist within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. For example, NCLB provisions which demand greater accountability arise from political pressure on schools to solve larger social problems. Accountability, among other coded terminology, reflects a social political agenda that may not support the interests of education. Moreover, laws and policies that are not directly linked to education, for example federal immigration law, have a profound impact on students and their parents (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010). Poverty and unfair distribution of material resources are other macro level forces that impact parent involvement (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011, Lawson & Alameda Lawson, 2012). Finally, even with statutes and good will in place, the inability to enforce key provisions of education policy is in itself a systemic barrier to parent involvement (Cavanagh, 2012).

### **Reconceptualizing Parent Involvement and the Role of School Social Worker**

For those concerned with education, the response to barriers cannot be acquiescence. There are genuine and meaningful ways to reform education and enhance opportunities for parent-school collaboration. Auerbach (2010), among others, argues for strong, meaningful school-family partnerships that are based on shared leadership. This type of collaboration goes well beyond the usual narrow, and often limiting, types of parent engagement and instead makes a place for authentic parent input. Auerbach asks, “What if instead of seeking to contain, train or manage parents in line with school agendas, schools sought out and attended to parent voices? What if educators got to know families’ dreams, goals and concerns?” (p. 728). In Auerbach’s view, school professionals need to see their roles as

“bridgers” rather than as “buffers” and promote “community building and shared accountability” (p. 731).

Innovative programming, community building, and sensitivity to the needs of families are ways that schools are broadening the scope of parent involvement (Alameda-Lawson, Lawson & Lawson, 2010). Providing special, culturally relevant activities and education-based resources and improving communication are some ways to enhance parent engagement (Randolph, et al, 2006). Another way is for schools to adopt a community-centered, collective approach to parent involvement, an approach that recognizes and validates the values, beliefs, and practices of families in the school community. This approach not only increases the amount of time parents engage in school, it also serves to empower parents to “help improve schools from the outside in as well as the inside out” (Alameda-Lawson, et al., 2010, p. 173). Involving parents directly in school leadership is another way to provide parents with an authentic way to partner with schools. Shared leadership allows parents to contribute to decision-making on the allocation of resources and on the school environment as well as to take a meaningful role in connecting school to the broader community (Auerbach, 2010). Parent/school partnerships based on shared leadership give all stakeholders equal investment in the wellbeing of the school.

Changing the nature of parent involvement can have an even more significant impact for groups that have been underrepresented in parent/school partnerships. Bolivar and Chrispeels (2011) suggest that for low-income and other marginalized families, opportunities for parent leadership can lead to changes that benefit all children. In their study of a parent leadership program, the authors found that program participants gained skills to effect change both individually and collectively. Moreover, the parents gained “social and intellectual

capital” which the authors explain helped parents to engage in “new forms of action” that transformed the roles for parents in schools (p. 4). Domina (2005) points to three outcomes of meaningful parent engagement. First, school efforts to engage families help parents become familiar with school practices and systems and understand academic and behavioral expectations. Second, parent participation in school programming and governance redistributes social control, giving parents both visibility and voice into what goes on in school. Finally, parent involvement gives parents access to “insider information” which helps parents to partner with schools to meet challenges and to sustain educational effectiveness and community building (p. 235-236).

Suarez-Orozco, Onaga and Lardemelle (2010) add the broader community to the partnership between school and families to address the unique needs of immigrant students whose parents may not share the school’s expectations for parent engagement. In their view, schools have a responsibility to pay close attention to the needs of families who do not fit traditional models for parent involvement. Lawson & Alameda Lawson (2012) also found great potential for school-family-community linkages in a school district that serves many Latino students. Parents who came together to form “communities of practice” developed skills and social capital to enhance their collective power and to reduce barriers to their children’s learning. These practice communities could pursue a variety of goals from sponsoring parent education programs to becoming activists for education reform. The authors suggest that school-family-community linkage, while not without limitations, holds promise for furthering the interests of all stakeholders. Blitz, et. al. (2013) make a similar call for collaboration in support of parent engagement and broaden the partnership by adding community resources like universities and social service agencies.

Based on their research with Latino families, Auerbach & Collier (2012) suggest several strategies for engaging parents in schools. These strategies include: building a school culture that values parent relationships; inviting parents directly to assume shared responsibility for student learning; starting initiatives that “meet parents where they are” not according to school expectations or assumptions; encouraging parent “voice” in planning and delivering programs for other parents and the broader school community; making sure that all programming is accessible to parents who do not speak English; helping parents to build relationships among themselves and between parents and school staff; and finally, developing programs that take “a long view” to ensure continuity and investment across the years of education (p. 31-32). These strategies need not be specific to a single population or an individual school, but rather hold promise as a wide-ranging approach to develop and sustain parent engagement in schools.

There is not an extensive literature on the role of social workers in facilitating parent involvement, but a few studies point to the critical role they might play. A study by Blitz, Kida, Gerhsam & Bronstein (2013) is grounded in key social work concepts that inform an approach to engaging parents in a poor, rural school district. The approach designed by social work faculty – with contributions from parents and school staff – incorporates elements of the environment and characteristics of all constituent groups. The conceptual framework for planning, implementing and evaluating the parent involvement program has three core components: strengths-based, trauma-informed, and systems-focused. The concept of strengths-based assumes that parents can be effective advocates for their children’s education, while trauma-informed recognizes the realities of parent’s experiences and environment. Systems-focused allows for examining the many variables that impact



families and schools and how these variables interact. In the program under study, social workers, with their unique skill set and orientation, helped to broker tensions between groups and to facilitate collaboration.

Alameda-Lawson, Lawson & Lawson (2010) found a similar role for social workers in promoting the involvement of parents in a low-income, culturally diverse school. In the program they studied, social workers designed and coordinated parent involvement efforts. Parent participants identified social workers as key to getting the program going and to facilitating initial interactions. In the beginning, social workers recruited parents by repeatedly going to their homes to address concerns and encourage participation. Parents credited the social workers' persistence as critical. As the program continued, parents noted that social workers' passion was inspiring (p. 177) and that social workers' "responsiveness to parent needs and concerns" also motivated them to continue participating in the program (p. 178). Finally, parents recognized social workers' efforts to help parents access resources in the community and to mobilize to address community needs. As Alameda-Lawson et. al. suggest, parents' response to social workers was so positive because of the social workers' commitment to social work values that "provide [and] develop interventions and supports in relation to the lived experiences and perceived realities of the client." (p. 178). Outreach efforts would not have been received as positively had they been based on "pre-existing (professional) agendas" to achieve engagement (p. 178).

Because social workers are trained to take a strengths-based, ecological, systems-focused perspective, they are perhaps the best situated to facilitate parent-involvement efforts. The school social worker has a unique role as liaison between families, schools, the broader community, and macro level policy and can therefore act as the bridge between

institutions and individuals. More research is needed on the role social workers might play in strengthening parent involvement, but in the literature that is available, school social workers “overwhelmingly” endorse the belief that parent involvement has a positive impact on educational outcomes (Randolph, et. al. 2006, p. 86).

This study will add to the research on the role of social workers in facilitating parent engagement in schools. Given the potential for school social workers to develop and strengthen family-school connections, it is critical to understand how they view their role in this process. Three questions will guide the present research: 1) How do school social workers assess the importance of parent involvement in school? 2) Do school social workers believe they have a role to play in parent involvement? 3) Do school social workers believe they have a role in mediating tensions that arise from conflicts between systems and stakeholders (school staff, parents, the broader community and macro-level policy)? The study will examine responses from a group of purposely selected school social workers to identify common themes and to note divergent perspectives.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this research is informed by a post-modern theory known as social construction. Social construction proposes that social reality is not free from human subjectivity, but rather a construct that humans co-create. Social construction is a dynamic process subject to change as beliefs, values, and attitudes shift. Social construction values multiple perspectives and affirms the importance of openness and flexibility when approaching those with dissimilar or opposing world views. Social construction has its roots in sociology and qualitative research methodology, especially grounded theory (Andrews,

2012). A fundamental assumption of social construction theory is that society has both a subjective and an objective reality. Objective in this sense means that once people create and share meaning, this meaning becomes an accepted, collective reality, independent of the individual. For constructionists, culture is essentially a set of beliefs which forms “a common sense understanding and consensual notion of what constitutes knowledge” (Andrews, 2012, p.2).

A search of relevant research literature in social work shows applications of social construction to social work theory and practice. Basham (2004) sees a direct connection between social construction and cross-cultural practice in social work. For her, however, the notion of “common sense understanding” is problematic. Instead, Basham argues that social workers, and by extension all school professionals, need to recognize the subjectivity of their own views and assumptions. The author explains that applying a constructionist approach requires allegiance to three main principles: 1) valuing multiple perspectives; 2) taking an “informed not knowing” stance; and 3) acknowledging “intersubjective space” (p. 289). Yan (2008) applies the concept of social constructionism to cross-cultural conflict in social work practice. Yan recognizes that culture is constructed, and emphasizes the idea that conflicting cultural constructs can exist simultaneously. Like Basham, Yan rejects the concept of a monolithic set of cultural values and beliefs which all members of society tacitly accept. Yan found three cultural tensions frequently mentioned in social work literature that are relevant to the topic of this paper. These tensions are: 1) social work values are western values that privilege the individual over the collective; 2) social work organizations are often linked to the dominant culture; 3) dominant culture social workers are often ethnocentric and “culturally blind” and therefore less effective when working with clients who are from non-

dominant cultures (pp. 317-318). Given these tensions, Yan argues that social workers must continually examine their assumptions about what constitutes “common sense” understanding and develop a critical stance from which to view their own biases. (p. 326).

Social construction theory underlies key assumptions guiding this research. The first assumption is that to understand parent-school dynamics, research must focus on documenting and analyzing how critical players (e.g. parents, students, school professionals) interpret their experiences. A second assumption is that the accepted reality of school culture is not a given, but rather a subjectively created construct, and, therefore, school culture can be re-created to incorporate diverse values, beliefs, and practices. Third, because social workers are trained to be aware of and validate diverse beliefs and values, they are likely to appreciate the social construction view that school culture should reflect the diverse world views of its constituent groups.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to examine social workers’ beliefs on the importance of parent engagement in school as well as their perceptions of the role of the social worker in facilitating engagement and mediating conflicts between parents, schools, communities, and education related policies. The research design for this study was qualitative and exploratory incorporating elements of ethnographic data collection and grounded theory analysis. The methodology aligns with principles of social construction explained above. The intent of this study was to collect and analyze the beliefs of practicing social workers and so the study was designed to allow research participants to answer a series of open-ended questions, thereby

permitting more depth and authenticity in their responses. The researcher conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with practicing school social workers. Once collected, the data was analyzed using open coding methodology in accordance with principles of grounded theory.

### **Sample**

The sampling technique that was used for this study was snowball sampling. To obtain a sample, the researcher first contacted school social workers with whom she had a professional connection. She then sought additional participants by asking these initial contacts for social workers who may have an interest in the current study. The researcher sought a sample size of 6 participants. The respondents for this study included licensed school social workers who work in public schools and private schools in both urban and suburban locations.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of St. Thomas to use human subjects. Before each interview, the researcher shared a consent form with the respondent, noting the purpose of the study and reviewing the protections that would preclude any detrimental outcome for the respondent. The consent form complied with University of Saint Thomas IRB and Protection of Human Subject guidelines, including adequate explanation of confidentiality of the respondent during the research process. Specific protections, noted on the consent form, included redacting the respondent's name from the field notes, transcript, and research paper, and deleting the audio recording of the interview within a month of the study's conclusion (see Appendix A for a copy of the consent form).

**Data Collection**

Data was collected in semi-structured interviews using a prepared list of questions developed by the researcher (see appendix B for a list of interview questions). During the interview, some of the questions were modified to elicit follow-up responses or to clarify questions that the respondent found unclear. Interviews were scheduled for 30 minutes in a private setting that was convenient for the respondent. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, but one interview was conducted over the phone. All interviews were recorded using a digital recording device. Following the interview, recordings of the interview were transcribed for analysis.

Interview questions for this research were informed by previous research on parent involvement and on concepts in social construction theory. The questions were designed to elicit respondents' beliefs regarding parent involvement and on their sense of the social worker's role in connecting parents and schools. More specifically, respondents were asked to explain their views on parent involvement, to offer definitions of parent involvement and to discuss how effectively their schools engage parents. Respondents were also asked to discuss the role of school social workers, both generally and in their individual cases, in developing and strengthening parent-school connections.

**Analysis Technique**

The technique used to interpret data for this study was content analysis based on the principles of grounded theory. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) grounded theory can be understood as "an interplay" of experience, induction and deduction. In grounded theory analysis, theories are derived from the close examination of data to determine recurring codes

and themes. These themes are then used to explain or to better understand the research topic (Berg & Lune, 2012).

In the current study, the transcribed data was reviewed multiple times by the researcher using open-code methodology. On each read-through of the data, the researcher identified salient words and phrases that stood as codes. Later, as codes began to repeat themselves, the researcher developed themes and began to assign codes to those thematic categories. According to content analysis protocol, at least three instances of a code are required to develop a theme (Berg, 2012). At the conclusion of the analysis, codes that appeared fewer than three times were omitted from the analysis.

## **Findings**

### **Parents are the First Teachers: Defining Parent Involvement**

The first theme identified in the data relates to definitions of parent involvement. The theme incorporates the various ways study respondents conceptualized the construct “parent involvement”. As in the research literature, social workers in the current study proposed a variety of definitions and specific examples of how and why parents are involved in their children’s formal education. This theme appeared in all of the data sets, and codes were similar across participants.

The theme “Definitions of Parent Involvement” is best understood as three distinct, but closely related, categories or domains. These domains are: Parents as Experts, Parents as Partners, and Parents as Resources.

**Parents as Experts.** Here respondents endorsed parents as the people who know their children best. Similarly, respondents emphasized the investment parents make in their children's well-being and supported the belief that parents should be respected as the most important teachers in their children's lives.

*Well, [parents] are the experts. That is the global bottom line for me. They are the most invested and most important people in a child's life.*

*Parents are their children's first teachers. They will always be the first teachers.*

*We have to believe that what a young mom says is more important than what a teacher says.*

*Parents have insight into what is problematic in and out of the school environment.*

*[Parents] see things that we don't see so I think you have to come at it with absolute respect.*

*I like to get [parents'] ideas because they know their kids best.*

*We need to recognize that we might be the classroom teachers for now, but parents will always be their teacher.*

*For a long time we promoted the misunderstanding that teachers were most responsible for educating children, that students and parents were responsible to the school. But it is the opposite. Schools are responsible to parents and students.*

**Parents as Partners.** Within this domain respondents, explained the many ways schools partner with parents to serve the needs and interests of students. Respondents noted what their schools do currently, and what they might do to create stronger partnerships.

*We need to share responsibility with parents.*

*I think that first and foremost, the best situation is when we partner with parents and parents are actively involved.*

*At conferences parents write a...goal. Parents are taught how to monitor their children's progress. They become part of the teaching team. They are co-teachers.*



*When I can have a good relationship with parents... they can understand, reinforce at home what we are working on at school and I understand what is happening at home so I can teach skills that better reinforce those skills.*

*[We are] not just looking at academic support the parents give, but the social emotional learning component. When we are partnering with parents...it is not just about math scores or reading scores, it is social skills.*

*I am always careful to let parents know that sending their kids to school everyday ready to learn is being a very involved parent and if you are doing that, everything else is extra in a way.*

*I have a kid who is really struggling with his classroom teacher. Mom and I talked and she asked "What can I do?" I suggested a chart. Mom said they would work on it at home so her son would feel invested. I asked Mom what might [her son] enjoy to motivate him? She knew Pokemon cards. He can earn cards every time he is successful. It worked like a charm.*

*There is accountability for homework, assistance with homework.*

*There is a whole continuum of parent involvement from too much to too little.*

**Parents as Resources.** Here respondents spoke to the many ways parents contribute to schools.

*Parent involvement is the most valuable resource we have.*

*They come in and volunteer weekly if they can. Some of them work in the library. Lots of them are on committees. They do grant writing. They share their skills.*

*I just always say to parents that anyway you can participate and be here is good and they take it to heart.*

*Next week a whole group of parents is coming to wash down every desk and table in the school.*

*On conference night last week, they made enough food to feed us for 3 days. There was food from many cultures, representing many communities.*

*On testing days, like when we are doing the MCAs, we have parents come in and monitor the hallways.*

*At my school, and we are really fortunate, you can't walk through the school at any minute, any day of the year, and I have never been wrong when I've said that. Never walked through the building without seeing a parent.*

*After-school activities [are] a very appropriate place for parents to be involved.*

### **Second Shift and Bus Schedules: Logistical Barriers to Parent Involvement**

The next set of themes identified in the data relate to barriers to parent involvement. These themes include logistical, cultural, institutional and systemic barriers that limit parents' ability to engage in their children's formal education. The first type of barrier identified by respondents is best described as "Logistical Barriers". These barriers relate to practical issues parents face in getting to school or to making school a priority over other family needs.

The first type of logistical barrier reflects the reality that many parents' work schedules do not permit them to visit school during school hours or in the evenings when schools typically schedule family programming. Many parents work hours beyond the school day or have inflexible jobs which do not allow them to leave the work place.

*You face the reality of logistical challenges. The reality of jobs and job schedules. It just is a challenge.*

*Some parents have jobs that don't allow them to come to school. Sometimes it is a schedule issue.*

*[To come to school] they take off time from work or if they work second or third shift, they take off from their sleep time.*

*Scheduling is a barrier. Teachers are available 8 to 4 and some parents can't come in then.*

*We plan events with certain assumptions: that everyone has a typical schedule, that parents want social time, that what we are offering has benefit to parents even if we don't ask them.*

*Parents who are driving from [far away] and dropping their kids off at 7 so they can get to work on time and they don't have the flexibility to take a day off of work.*

Respondents identified transportation as a second type of logistical barrier. Parents that don't have reliable vehicles or who rely on bus service face difficulty getting to school, particularly during off-peak hours.

*[We have] really basic expectations that we take for granted; it's a real stretch for some people particularly if they...don't have easy access to transportation to get places.*

*I had one mother. She rode [her son] on the handle bars of her bike for the first week of school.*

*Some people can't come in the evening because of transportation or they don't want to because of the people who will be here.*

Access to teachers is another issue raised by one respondent. She commented that teachers often live outside of communities where they teach, especially in schools that are located in core urban or low-income neighborhoods. This makes it difficult for teachers to meet parents during off-school hours and it limits contact parents and teachers might have in non-school locations.

*Teachers don't live in the communities where they teach. They are not accessible.*

Another respondent proposed technology as a barrier to parent involvement. More and more parent-school communication is done through e-mail and internet. Families without access to technology miss this critical point of contact with the school.

*You think about technology...Does a family have internet at home? Does the family have wi-fi? Does the family have a computer? Does the family have a cell phone?*

A final logistical barrier has to do with poverty and other psychosocial stressors parents face. Respondents suggest that these challenges make it difficult for parents to participate in school.

*I see [socioeconomic issues] have a greater impact on [parent] involvement and that again is pure logistics.*

*Being homeless and highly mobile.*

*Being a single parent, losing a job, going through separation or divorce, anything that impacts finances or stability.*

### **They Told Me to Show Up: Cultural Barriers to Parent Involvement**

The next type of barrier to parent involvement can be defined as “cultural barriers”. These barriers include socioeconomic status, race, language, ethnicity and values related to education. Some respondents focused on barriers created by socioeconomic status. These respondents identified poverty as a barrier to parent involvement and considered that to be a more significant barrier than other cultural barriers like race.

*So, I think it is about socioeconomics and classism.*

*I think it honestly is...more about socioeconomic class than race.*

*Another challenge is that we do a lot on the surface level. We want you to show up and act like a middle class white woman.*

*Do you see that same barrier based on race or on socioeconomic status or on culture? And again, I would connect that to socioeconomic class.*

*Unfortunately at our school, some of the families in poverty, or the homeless and highly mobile, are students of color so they fall into those [stereotypes]...then it becomes our students of color, ‘those families’ don’t always show up.*

Other respondents explicitly focused on race as a barrier. They identified conflicts between white school staff and parents of color which they believe stem from misunderstanding and misplaced assumptions.

*Race is a barrier. I think that it is on both sides. I think it would be foolish to think that we don’t have pieces of us that are sometimes discriminatory. It is societal. We have to be really aware so that we can act appropriately.*

*We have a limited tolerance for discomfort and that is a challenge. We need to accept discomfort when we get a diverse group together.*

*Some communities – African American and Native Americans – have a very negative construct of social workers.*

*We operate in a dominant culture reality; it is not a reality for everyone.*

*There are three middle schools. One...middle school would have more diversity. We are centrally located geographically and so we are mid-range diversity and the [third] middle school has less diversity and tends to be more Caucasian and also less diversity with socioeconomic class.*

Respondents recognized language differences as another barrier to parent involvement in schools. When parents do not speak English or have limited knowledge of educational terms and concepts, their efficacy as advocates is undermined.

*It is difficult to communicate when you can't speak the same language. We have tried to help through an interpreting line. The reality is that you aren't going to have that great a conversation through interpreters.*

*Language is difficult for classroom teachers; it is difficult for us. In assessment, I will bring in an interpreter even if the parent has good conversational English because we are talking about things that are not conversational at all.*

*I have conversations with parents to help them just to understand the process. What disability means, what it doesn't mean. Culturally it means something different.*

*Sometimes we have grandparents with very different views of special education. For example, a grandma thought learning disability meant retarded.*

Two respondents said that they were surprised to learn that non-English speaking parents at their schools did not identify language as a significant barrier to their involvement.

*Even among Spanish-speaking families, they did not indicate [language] as being a barrier. I was surprised.*

*I did a parent survey [with ELL families] about barriers to education. I listed cultural barriers, race, ethnicity, ELL. Interestingly enough, we did not have a single parent mark cultural barriers.*

A final type of cultural barrier is best described as biases that can confound cooperation and common interests. All respondents admitted that they are constantly checking the assumptions they make about groups represented in their school community and encourage

colleagues and even parents to examine biases and assumptions that work against parent-school collaboration.

*Assumptions are a challenge. Teachers assume some parents don't care. That is a driver for how you interact with them. Parents pick up on this and get a sense that they are undervalued and disrespected.*

*We are all of us sometimes ignorant. We don't understand the culture and can make big mistakes. I have made mistakes and hopefully I have learned from it.*

*Even parents bring their own kinds [of discrimination], not only cultural or racial, but their own thoughts and own experiences about education.*

*We all bring to the table our biases. If we are not aware of it, we can't do anything about it.*

### **Whose School is It?: Institutional Barriers to Parent Involvement**

A fourth category of barriers identified by the respondent are “institutional barriers”. These barriers were characterized by respondents as conflicts in role expectations of schools and parents. One type of barrier respondents identified is the “mixed messages” schools send to parents. These messages encourage parents to show up at school, but also circumscribe what parents can do when they take schools up on the offer.

*We use a model called the Parent Teacher Home Visit. This model was created by parents who were tired of being blamed. They were also tired of schools saying ‘Just show up. Just come.’ They would show up and schools wouldn't know what to do with them.*

*We have promoted the idea that the teacher is in charge and parents don't have a say. And we make up rules all the time.*

*For most families because things are just done differently and education is changing and families are not always educated on the changes. We just assume they come along with us.*

A second type of institutional barrier is the role schools force parents into. Many respondents commented on the role parents are expected to play as enforcers of school policy and practice. Respondents suggested that homework accountability is a particularly challenging obligation required of parents.

*Personally, I have a little bit of a hard time with [the parent communication web-site], partly because adolescence is a time when there is a lot of strain on the parent-child connection and if there is too much battle around homework, I worry we can lose that relationship and that foundation that they are going to need heading into high school.*

*I get saddened by the role parents are put in around homework and monitoring homework.*

*We hold parents accountable to hold their kids accountable which causes conflict between the parent and the child and may cause problems between the parent and the teacher.*

*There is a new way of thinking in some curriculum and so if parents are solely held accountable for helping that child with homework and they don't understand the academic task themselves, that is a huge challenge for some families.*

Another institutional barrier is the type of programming offered. School personnel typically plan school events and outreach without input from parents. These efforts tend to work against, rather than support, parent involvement.

*Food is not a draw. Do you really think parents are going to drive all the way across town for a taco? For a slice of pizza? Really?*

*It is tricky to find programming that works. A number of years ago, I wrote a grant to some parent programming that was kind of designed to [be fun and engaging], Bring in special topics, presenters, provide dinner and child care. And it was just very, very poorly attended. And we find that over and over again.*

*I wish we had more opportunity for parent involvement in a fun, supportive way rather than an accountable, discipline kind of focused way.*

Respondents suggested that the most common parent involvement programs often have the unintended consequence of excluding the parents the efforts are intended to bring in.

Respondents clearly demarcate parents who feel a sense of belonging with the school community from those parents who feel marginalized and disconnected.

*Sometimes parents don't have the best experiences at school and they bring that to school and we have to deal with that.*

*[Many] parents volunteer and those tend to be families that really do have a sense of belonging with the school.*

*The parents who show up, their kids tend to be doing very well and they have positive feelings connected to the school versus the parents where maybe the child isn't doing as well or maybe they haven't had those positive connection feelings. Capturing that population to partner with is more difficult.*

*It's the parents who don't have that sense of belonging with the school, who maybe haven't had positive experiences, either themselves or with their child, that's the population of parents that I think we miss. And, trying to figure out how we can give those parents that positive connection and that sense of belonging, and that partnership is really crucial and missing.*

*Right or not, parents don't necessarily have input into what makes a school a school.*

A final institutional barrier is related to resource allocation. There are not sufficient resources to meet all needs and this impacts how parents perceive the school's ability and willingness to serve their family.

*What it really boils down to is what your parent group values. And whatever it is they value, that's what they want to see and if they don't see it, they are not happy.*

*There are always resources that we don't have enough of.*

*People are really trying to get what their family needs out of school which only makes sense. [One] school would be the most diverse. They have the most, highest percentage of free and reduced lunch. And also, they have the most services to support kids.*

*We have a solidly capable academic group of kids so students who get the enrichment programming, what used to be called gifted and talented the district doesn't want us to say those words anymore. That is something that parents would like to see more of if their child is not included.*

*Parents are advocating. You can't be unhappy with them for doing that, but you also have to be able to look at the big picture when you are making those hard decisions.*



**No Child Left Untested: Systemic Barriers to Parent Involvement**

“Systemic Barriers” refers to macro-level policy and other outside-of-school mandates that limit parent’s ability to impact how schools function. Systemic barriers frustrate both parents and teachers and respondents saw these issues as an opportunity for parent-school alliance. Most respondents identified No Child Left Behind, and its requirement for high-stakes assessment, as a particular barrier to parent involvement and, more broadly, a barrier to effective educational practice.

*I think that the emphasis with the policies, even NCLB, the emphasis is on testing. Everything is on test scores.*

*Social work has evolved. NCLB changed everything.*

Two respondents commented that parents were beginning to challenge testing mandates.

*[Testing] has been the biggest implication with policy, this emphasis on test scores. And I think that was driven, perhaps initially, by parental outcry, but I am seeing the pendulum might be swinging as there is parental outcry on the other side now.*

*I am getting excited to see some parental push-back. You know we want schools that are more than just about test scores and teaching our kids reading and math.*

One respondent identified the achievement gap between white students and students of color as a particular area of concern that had to be addressed both in and outside of schools.

*Teachers feel an urgency about lack of progress and about making gains and about meeting potential. We need to create a sense of urgency in parents.*

Finally, respondents identified ways parents used the political system to advocate for their children’s interests. Respondents commented on how parents were successful in their efforts and on these efforts were frustrated.

*Parents are knowledgeable and tuned in because that’s how they live, but that is also their investment in their child.*

*Parents at our school have a history of going to the [School] Board, of going to the state, of letter writing, fund raising, because the district tends to put a lot of funding, the*

*funding follows the poverty. The parent group [in this part of the district] tends to make up financially for that and it gets to a point where it is really not fair or reasonable and so parents, are, in an effort to understand the inequality of how funding gets distributed, they get very involved politically. So they can be more effective and they are.*

*You have to be pretty savvy because if you are not aware and you don't keep track of that funding, you know.*

*I think there should be more flexibility on the local level. I think we should encourage more discourse.*

*In the public school [school reform] obviously happens more through the legislative process and who do we elect and how they evaluate teachers and things like that.*

### **School Mom: The Role of Social Workers**

The final theme relates to the role social workers play in involving parents in school. Respondents commented on the many ways social workers worked with families and on both the successes and limitations of their efforts. Respondents identify a key role for social workers as helping families connect with school.

*I changed my title from school social worker to school mom. We have families from all over the world. It is a diverse school and some cultures have no word for social worker. There is no shame in asking another mom for help. So, I become an extension of mom at school. This is a beautiful way of exponentially making an impact on the school day.*

*You really prioritize getting to know all the kids and reaching out to parents anytime it is even a little bit appropriate, just connecting.*

*I doesn't have to be a big thing or problem, but it really comes down to just making lots of connections and trying really hard to be respectful of parenting, but also to be very diligent about, understand that your role is supporting...education.*

*I have had a lot of parents say to me that they wish there had been someone when [they] were in grade school when my dad died or I wish there was someone to come and ask me how I was doing and no one ever did.*

Another important role is helping families access services in the community.

*My role, and I have been expanding it, in some ways...is how can I get bang for my buck in helping families make their lives easier and ultimately helping the student learn more successfully.*

*We are often the key individual in a building that knows how and what community resources are out there and how to get access to those community resources.*

Social work positions in many school districts are funded by federal money for Title I and special education funding. For this reason, many respondents identified their primary responsibility was working with the special education population.

*One of the main things that I do is normalize a lot of things that people define as a problem.*

*Most of us only work with special ed. We are part of the problem solving team. We help general ed teachers do remediation and helping a child adjust to their environment, better succeed in their natural environment. I also end up doing IEP work. In special education, we are often the gatekeeper for that family, so we are the first connection for that family whose child may be in the process of assessment.*

*We are that entry point for families into special education which I think is a really crucial place to be because we want that to be a trusting, respectful, welcoming, nonjudgmental place for parents to enter the system.*

Another crucial role for social workers is in the area of mental health. While some respondents said they were not directly involved in mental health practice, they all identified the importance of their training and expertise in this area.

*The role of the school social worker is always to support education, but that's complicated and I think mental health [is part of that support] and providing a safe space sometimes or just having an open door.*

*Social workers are so important because we are mental health professionals. We know poverty is a risk factor for mental health disorders. We can differentiate between what is clinical, what is temporary and what is personality. We can recommend accommodations and we can do prevention.*

*We understand that mental health treatment is an area of mistrust for some communities. We can help families get access to mental health care and we can connect families to other families who have had positive experiences with mental health treatment. It is important to know that all families need guidance and there is no shame in asking for help.*

*I know there is a lot of debate about how clinical a school social worker is and it has been debated amongst clinicians and school social workers as well as other folks. My perspective is... that it is very clinical.*

*I really believe that even though we are not diagnosing and prescribing medications...we [are the ones] who have access to kids because of mandatory attendance. We have access that no one else has and we also have the ability to do some things...that don't require a parent to have a different schedule or to have a car. We can actually provide services during the day that the school bus brings them to.*

Respondents concurred that social workers serve the vital function as mediators, educators, and liaisons between different school constituencies.

*As we have progressed, we realize that kids don't perform when they are under stress and we need to do some preventative stuff.*

*We are key in crisis. If a student is in crisis, we are often the individual that is helping that family assess the severity of what is going on and helping access those resources to support that student if that means community.*

*We also do a lot of conflict resolution between administration and families around discipline or suspensions, or expulsions, or often we are brought in to help mediate solutions in conflicts.*

*We as social workers...don't administer consequences and we are not responsible for that, but we are often working with those kids that are facing those consequences and we are trying to help that family navigate that process.*

## **Discussion & Implications**

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The six themes identified above were evident throughout the interview data. Respondents came back to these themes several times during the interview, even when answering interview questions that were not directly related to these themes. The salience of codes and themes was evident through multiple reviews of the data making the identification of codes and themes reliable. The themes provided a framework for answering the research questions: 1) How do school social workers assess the importance of parent involvement in

school? 2) Do school social workers believe they have a role to play in parent involvement?

3) Do school social workers believe they have a role in mediating tensions that arise from conflicts between systems and stakeholders (school staff, parents, the broader community and macro-level policy)?

The first theme “Definitions of Parent Involvement” was the most prominent theme in the data. There was evidence of this theme across data sets and while there was variety in the language respondents used to define parent involvement, the content of their responses mostly fell into three categories, or domains, of parent involvement: Parents as Experts, Parents as Partners, and Parents as a Resource. Several codes – including the words “experts”, “partners”, “co-teachers”, – occurred frequently in the data. These codes suggest that social workers view parents as occupying a critical role in their children’s formal education, a role that is at once representational and practical. The role is representational in the sense that respondents believe parents are the most important advocates, or representatives, for their children’s interests and they occupy a critical place as the guardians of family values and beliefs related to education. A parent’s role is practical in the sense that parents engage in definable activities that align with those values and beliefs.

Within the first domain, “Parents as Experts”, respondents emphasized the privileged role parents play in their children’s lives. Respondents used phrases like “the first teachers” and “most responsible” to describe their belief in the primacy of parents’ role in formal education. For respondents, the concept of parents knowing their children best seems to be foundational for all other beliefs about parent involvement. Nearly every interview question evoked a response that had this concept as subtext. For the social workers in this study,

genuine acknowledgement of parents' insight and investment is the starting point for involving parents in schools.

The second domain, "Parents as Partners", reflects the respondents' core belief that parents are their allies in educating children. Respondents recognized that the nature of the partnership depended on students' ages and their particular learning needs; however, the concept of parents as part of the "teaching team" remained constant despite differences in the educational context. Respondents described the ideal relationship between schools and parents as one where values and practices are mutually reinforced. One respondent explained that "a good relationship with parents" is one in which parents understand what happens at school and school understands, and supports, what is happening at home. Another respondent described the parent-school relationship as "co-teaching". From this perspective, parents and school staff work together to set academic goals, teach skills, monitor progress, and assess outcomes. In the ideal situation, education is seamless between school and home. Respondents further emphasized the role of parents and schools in promoting social-emotional learning and skills for self-efficacy.

Within the third domain, "Parents as Resources", respondents acknowledged the many practical ways parents contributed to schools. Respondents commented on parent volunteers in classrooms and on ways parents directly supported teachers, for example by providing meals on conference days or by monitoring hallways during standardized testing. One respondent said that direct parent involvement was the most valuable resource the school had, while another said that nearly all parents at the school gave of themselves whether materially or with their presence in the building. Respondents commented that in districts with wide income disparities, parents in more affluent schools provided financial

support, making up for funding that was allocated elsewhere or underwriting programs that they wanted for their children.

The second theme, “Logistical Barriers”, was the easiest to code and categorize because of the specific words and phrases used by respondents. Defining logistical barriers as real-world obstacles to parent involvement made coding straightforward. Codes for these barriers included: “work/job”, “scheduling”, “transportation”, “homelessness”, and “accessibility”. Respondents recognized that some logistical barriers correlated with poverty, like unreliable transportation and lack of financial resources, while other logistical barriers did not, for example inflexible work schedules. Interestingly, while respondents readily identified logistical barriers, they were less forthcoming with ideas for overcoming these real-world challenges. Only one respondent spoke directly to her school’s efforts to address logistical barriers. She described a program adopted by her school to make twice-yearly home visits, visits that shift responsibility from parents to school to make contact. Efforts like this hold promise for easing logistics as an impediment to participation.

The third theme “Cultural Barriers” appeared across data sets. Because of the way respondents interpreted the construct “culture” and because of the way interview questions were phrased, culture in this context was limited to race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status. Codes related to this theme were: “poverty”, “race”, “language”, “diversity”, “culture”, and “bias”. Each of these codes represents more specific words or phrases such as “homeless and highly mobile”, “free and reduced lunch”, “middle class”, “families of color”, and “ELL” which are themselves coded references to specific populations in schools. The theme cultural barriers generated the greatest variety of opinion among respondents. Some respondents felt that socioeconomic status was the most

significant barrier to parent involvement, while others saw race as a serious, often unspoken, obstacle to parent-school collaboration. Perhaps surprisingly, the difference of opinion did not correspond to school geography. Some respondents who worked in urban districts with greater racial diversity were, in fact, less focused on race as a barrier. By contrast, a respondent who worked in a suburban district said that racial bias was pervasive and impacted everyone in the school community, school staff and parents alike. Across respondents, language differences were considered problematic, but not necessarily a critical barrier to parent involvement. All of the social workers served families who spoke a home language other than English, but unlike the research literature which finds language a major barrier, respondents in this study did not identify linguistic differences as especially significant.

The fourth theme, “Institutional Barriers”, was not as obvious as other themes during initial reviews of the data. Once this theme was identified, however, its relevance to the study became clear. Institutional barriers in this study refer to schools policies, practices, and tacit expectations that create conflict between parents and schools and often inhibit parents’ participation in their children’s education. Codes within this theme included: “blame”, “conflict”, “power”, “accountability”, “belonging”, and “resources”. These codes were evident when respondents spoke about failed efforts to encourage parent engagement and when they explained why parents felt disengaged from their children’s schools. One respondent said that parents were tired of being blamed for adverse educational outcomes, while another acknowledged that parents don’t always have the best experiences at school. Respondents identified ways that school programming failed to engage families which, they believed, further reinforced the idea that schools are uninterested in meaningful parent



involvement. One respondent remarked that programs designed to be “fun and engaging” were very poorly attended, while another questioned the tired strategies that schools use to attract parents. She posed the (rhetorical) question, “Do you really think parents are going to drive all the way across town for a slice of pizza?” Respondents recognized that educators make assumptions about parents’ knowledge of curriculum and educational methodology and schools put parents in the untenable position of enforcing school policy and practices. Passing accountability to parents makes parents an easy target when students fail to meet academic expectations. Respondents saw an important role for parents in special education planning and in instructional goal setting, but recognized that parents and schools sometimes had competing interests in how to best achieve educational outcomes. Respondents commented that their role as social workers was to “explain the process”, but at times they felt uncomfortable justifying school practices that were not necessarily in the best interests of students or their families. One respondent expressed her concern that “We make up rules all the time.”

An institutional barrier that several respondents raised was coded as “belonging”. Respondents identified two groups of parents in their schools. There were the parents that felt a sense of belonging with the school community and those that felt estranged from it. They acknowledged that parents who eagerly partnered with teachers and who frequently volunteered probably associated the school with positive, supportive experiences. Parents characterized as “resistant” or “absent” were perceived as having negative experiences or weak connections with schools. Respondents believed it was the school’s responsibility to reach out to less engaged parents, to identify needs, and to respond in culturally appropriate

ways. While they identified essential gaps in school efforts, however, most respondents did not suggest ways to address the barrier of exclusion.

The fifth theme, “Systemic Barriers” is used to delineate macro-level barriers to parent involvement. For respondents, federal and state educational policies, especially No Child Left Behind and the accountability movement, as well as funding and resource allocation have the greatest impact on parent involvement efforts. Respondents expressed concern with the focus on testing and assessment and worried about the disproportionate impact of standards on students with non-typical learning profiles. They saw the focus on testing as a distraction from other important work and supported parents in their efforts to organize against testing. Respondents further identified funding and the distribution of resources as another macro-level barrier to parent participation. At the district level, federal funding for education is tied to programs like Title I which redress educational inequality based on poverty and disability. Title 1 funds are dependent on how many students from these designated populations the schools serve. In large districts where income is distributed unequally, and neighborhoods are largely segregated by socioeconomic level, some schools receive more federal dollars for programming than others. One respondent noted that her school serves families with higher incomes relative to the rest of the district. She said that parents have become politically “savvy” by figuring out how the district allocates funding and going to the School Board with concerns about resource distribution. She said that parents also write grants and raise money privately to fund programming they want in the school. One respondent, whose school serves mostly low-income and racially diverse students, commented on the achievement gap, a macro-level social and political issue which has received considerable attention recently. She expressed her staff’s sense of urgency to

improve student outcomes and the sense of mission she and teachers had to instill this urgency in parents.

The interview question that led to the sixth theme, “Role of the Social Worker”, elicited the most expansive responses from study participants. Among the codes for this theme were: “helper”, “support”, “mental health provider”, “partner”, “community”, “special education” and “mediator”. All respondents addressed the critical role school social workers played, not only as a point of connection for parents and families, but also as the staff member whose training and professional orientation allowed them to help others – students, teachers, administrators, parents, community members - navigate intersecting systems. Respondents believed they served as an important “entry point” for parents to school. They saw their role in connecting families to community resources and as both case managers and advocates for students in special education. Respondents defined a crucial role as mental health professionals and clinicians. One respondent commented on the debate over whether or not school social workers were clinicians, but concluded that mental health needs are best met in schools because that is where children spend most of their time. Another respondent said that school social workers helped dispel misunderstandings about mental health, and other respondents spoke to how social workers could model social emotional teaching and learning for colleagues. A final role for school social workers according to respondents is as mediator. As one respondent explained, social workers are not responsible for discipline and therefore they are well placed to help resolve conflicts between various school constituencies. This final theme will be discussed more thoroughly in the sections that follow.

### **Relevance to the Research Literature**

Themes found in the data for this study correspond to themes identified in previous research. The first theme, definitions of parent involvement, is evident throughout the research literature, and as in this study, parent involvement is defined in various ways. Respondents in this study recognized both the practical ways parents are involved in school and the ways they represent their families' interests, beliefs, values and practices related to formal education. Scholars reinforce the concept that parent involvement is a complex construct that is best understood and studied from multiple dimensions (Bracke & Corte, 2008; Grolnick, 1997; Barton, et. al., 2004; Carreron, et. al., 2005; Jeynes, 2010; Auerbach & Collier, 2012). As with the first theme, the second and third themes are widely mentioned in the research literature. Like respondents in this study, research authors identify logistical barriers as a critical impediment to parent involvement (Alameda-Lawson, et al., 2010; Auerbach, 2010; Randolph et al., 2006; Suarez-Orozco, 2010) and argue that cultural barriers, especially as they relate to race, language and class, represent an additional set of barriers (Suarez-Orozco, et. al., 2010; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010; Aurerbach, 2010; Greenberg, 2012). Moreover, institutional barriers, particularly as they relate to conflicting expectations about the respective roles of parents and school personnel, are mentioned frequently in the literature on parent involvement (Blitz, et. al., 2013; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010; Auerbach, 2010; Bolivar, et al., 2011; Doucet, 2011; Ruiz, 2009; Carreron, et. al., 2005) as they were by respondents in this study. Finally, systemic barriers are less frequently explored in the research literature, and therefore, might be an interesting subject for future research.

Respondents in this study call for change in the way schools reach out to parents. The research literature supports the need for meaningful reform built on an expanded role for parents. In the literature, there are examples of successful efforts to engage parents that incorporate innovative programming and shared leadership. Various studies reviewed for this research identify accessible, culturally relevant programming that encourages parent involvement (Bolivar, et al., 2011; Randolph, et al, 2006, Ruiz, 2006). Other studies explore the possibility of authentic parent leadership in schools as a way to empower parents to take a meaningful role in their children's formal education (Alameda-Lawson, et al., 2010; Auerbach, 2010; Bolivar, et al., 2011; Doucet, 2011; Suarez-Orozco, 2010).

A respondent in the current study mentioned a promising parent engagement program that does not appear often in a search of relevant scholarly literature. This program, called the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project, was developed in Sacramento, California and has since expanded to nearly a dozen school districts across the country. In this program, teachers, social workers, administrators and other school staff form pairs to conduct two to three home visits spread across the school year. The purpose of these visits is to engage families outside of the school building and to build trust (Kalb, 2013). School visitors are trained to listen more than talk. They do not take notes, nor do they prescribe what parents should do at home. Rather they ask parents what they expect for their children, develop joint goals for education, give parents tools to monitor and assess educational progress, elicit feedback on how schools are meeting student and family needs, and learn about values and practices that inform parent expectations for their children's education (Matthews, 2014; Kalb, 2013; Smith, 2013). As the respondent in this study said, "[School staff] need to approach this work humbly and with the deepest respect for our students' first teachers."

While it has not been widely studied, The Teacher-Parent Home visit program holds promise as a way to reform and expand parent engagement efforts.

### **Relevance to Social Work Research and Practice**

As Alameda-Lawson, et al (2010), Randolph, et al (2006) and respondents in the current study suggest, social workers can play a critical role in facilitating parent involvement in schools. As professionals trained to take an ecological approach to issues, social workers are able to identify the structural and cultural barriers that impede meaningful interaction between schools and families. In their role as liaison between students, parents, teachers, and school administrators, they are prepared to facilitate collaboration between these various stakeholders. Social workers are well-situated to listen to the concerns of parents and to identify the ways schools intentionally and unintentionally exclude parents. Moreover, they can suggest ways that schools might increase parent engagement.

Respondents in this study identified several ways social workers can facilitate more meaningful parent engagement. Respondents explained that while some of these ideas are being implemented on a small-scale in their schools, they have not realized the full potential of innovative programming and a reorientation to the role of social worker. Four promising ideas were suggested in the data. An overview of these suggestions follows:

- **Bring programming to the community.** Several respondents suggested that schools need to reconceptualize how they develop and implement programming meant for parents. They suggested traditional programming places the burden on parents to show up at school, but schools might better meet the needs of students and families by expanding the notion of school beyond the confines of the building to include the

community within which a school is situated. Moving programming to places where families live, work, and socialize could ease logistical barriers and remove institutional barriers that reinforce differences in power and control. School programs might occur in family homes, locations that are convenient to places parents work, in churches, in community centers, or in parks. Families, and other community members, could plan and lead programs based on needs they identify. As one study respondent pointed out, parents do not attend educational programs to socialize; parents want a clear purpose for their input and engagement. Moving programming outside the school building is an acknowledgement that education is a responsibility best shared by the whole community.

- **Gear programming to parents who don't show up, rather than to those who do.** Respondents commented frequently that traditional models of parent involvement are geared to parents who feel a sense of belonging in school. Parents who show up tend to have positive associations with school, both for themselves and for their children. Respondents in the study suggested that too often efforts to engage parents have the unintended consequence of creating two groups: the in-group and the out-group. Parents who feel ambivalent about or excluded from school may choose not to attend events geared to parents whom they perceive as “insiders”. As one respondent pointed out, some parents avoid events because they have negative feelings about the other parents who are likely to be there. According to respondents, the solution to the problem of exclusion is not to do more of the same, but rather to take meaningful steps to involve all parents in program development and implementation. To make this happen, schools must expressly

- invite parents who do not often come to school to take planning and leadership roles and to develop innovative programming, rather than making small changes to programs that have proven tired and ineffective.
- **Expand the role of social worker beyond special education.** A third, strongly supported recommendation is to expand the role of social workers to include the general education population. In many school districts, principals use money designated for special education to fund social work positions. That means that the primary responsibility for many school social workers is case management for Individual Education Plans (IEPs). This responsibility leaves little time for social workers to engage with students outside of special education and it limits their involvement with whole school planning and programming. According to respondents, some schools use money from their own budgets to pay for social workers who work across school populations, and a few districts allocate dollars from the general budget, rather than federal special education money, to fund social work positions. Funding positions with general education dollars allows social workers the flexibility to benefit a greater number of students and their families. When their positions are not so narrowly defined, school social workers are freed to work on issues like parent involvement that impact all students.
  - **Conceptualize the school social worker as an extension of the family. Embrace the concept of “School Parent”.** The most intriguing idea to emerge from this study is the call to reconceptualize the role of school social worker as an extension of the family in school. As one respondent explained, “I changed my title from school social worker to school mom.” In her view, the school mom does not replace the



home mom, but rather represents her interests in school. The school social worker as school parent assumes the kind of care, dedication, and expectation that a parent has for her child. To paraphrase the same respondent, “A child acts differently when his mom is in the room. He knows what she expects and acts accordingly.” From this perspective, the role of social worker is not wholly situated in school, but rather in the intersection between school and home. In this role, social workers represent both the values of school and the values of home and they find ways to mediate tensions that arise if these values conflict. Ideally, school social workers would spend time in the communities where students live, visiting families in their homes, attending community events, shopping in neighborhood businesses, and participating in religious or cultural activities. Students would see social workers not as separate from their families and neighborhoods, but rather as an integral part of a supportive community. While this idea might be the most difficult to realize, and would likely generate debate among social workers, it has the potential for the most lasting impact.

### **Relevance for Policy**

Three significant implications for policy emerge from this study. These policy implications are related to legislation and funding priorities at the federal, state, and local levels. First, respondent data from the study reinforces the call for better compliance with parent involvement provisions in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. NCLB mandates that schools include parent involvement in their strategic planning and funding, yet research shows that the parts of the law that contain this mandate are rarely followed or enforced. While NCLB remains controversial, there are many sections of the law that are built on best practice, including engaging parents in educational decision making, school leadership, and

reciprocal home-school teaching and learning. The funding dedicated to parent involvement through Title I and related educational laws could be used to develop innovative programs that are better aligned with NCLB outcome goals and with many state and district goals for parent engagement. For NCLB to be effective, school administrators, school staff, parents and community members must prioritize parent involvement and be intentional about allocating resources to reforming current parent involvement efforts. Moreover, these same constituencies need to lobby politicians to focus on educational policy and legislation to ensure that laws that benefit students, families and schools receive the necessary oversight and funding.

Several respondents in this study recommended a second policy change. They repeatedly critiqued the current focus on standardized testing which they strongly believed was counterproductive to learning. Respondents challenged the need for frequent, high-stakes testing as a measure of progress and commented on the detrimental impact of testing on all students. They objected to curricula that were altered to accommodate test taking and to the pressure on students and teachers to meet unrealistic standards. They also rejected shifting accountability from school to parents and to requiring parents to enforce school practices and policies which they had no say in creating. Recent federal laws, as well as policy and laws in many states, tie test results to funding and to the evaluation of school performance. As such, testing has become a primary focus for districts and for schools and this has led to a shift in both practice and funding priorities. In many districts, programming and curriculum that is not directly related to testing has been pared down or eliminated and school staff has felt increased pressure to limit instruction in key areas in order to “teach to the test”. Respondents noted that parents have begun to push back against frequent high-

stakes testing especially as they see their children's educational opportunities diminish.

Educators, community members and others involved in education must also mobilize to insist on changes in educational policy. Testing may be one component of policy intended to improve student outcomes, but as the centerpiece of such policy, it deprives students of the best possible education.

A final policy implication is directly related to school social work. This study points to the need to increase the number of school social workers who are able to dedicate time and expertise to enhancing parent involvement in schools. There are many ways this policy could be realized. For one, government at all levels could allocate more money to hiring school social workers and to maintaining their positions over time. Next, districts could commit to ensuring that schools have funding to cover social workers who could work across school populations, not just with designated populations like special education. Third, parents could organize to insist that schools dedicate greater resources to parent involvement. These resources would include more time from school social workers. Ideally, parents, social workers, and other school staff would have the resources necessary to sustain meaningful collaboration. As was discussed earlier, school social workers could play a key role in encouraging such collaboration, but they need a commitment from their schools to dedicate time and attention to these efforts. Finally, school social workers themselves could demand that more resources be allocated to fund social work positions. As a professional group, they could be strong advocates for increasing social work service and for furthering the interests of all concerned with improving school-home partnerships.

**Implications for Future Research (strengths & limitations of current research)**

The current study has several limitations. For one, the sample size was small and the data from the study represents a limited number of perspectives. Next, the sample was selected from a relatively limited geographical area. A larger study, which included respondents from diverse locations, would likely yield greater variability in the data. Third, the study had only one primary researcher. While data analysis was systematic and conformed to grounded theory protocols, interpretation was biased by the researcher's own perspectives and experiences. Finally, the study was limited in scope. Ideally, the study would have included the perspectives of other school stakeholders, including students, teachers, administrators, and community members. Such a study would provide a more complete view of the role of parents in education as well as a more expansive plan for how to better encourage parent-school cooperation.

There are many opportunities for further research on the role of social workers in parent engagement. Future research might expand on earlier studies which focus on how social workers perceive their roles in parent involvement. Research might examine the most effective ways to encourage parent involvement among underrepresented parent groups and the ways social workers can plan, implement, and promote more culturally relevant programming. Moreover, research might expand current knowledge on effective supports for parent involvement by using school case studies. Research might also use ethnographic techniques to explore the ways parents perceive their roles in their children's formal education which would give school social workers critical insight into the values, beliefs, and practices of the families they serve. Future research could build on what is known and add to an understanding of how to strengthen the role of the "first teachers" in formal education.

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**Appendix A****CONSENT FORM  
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS  
GRSW682 RESEARCH PROJECT****Parent Involvement in School**

I am conducting a study about parent involvement in school. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because of your professional expertise as a school social worker. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Nancy Joseph-Goldfarb, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, College of St. Catherine/University of St. Thomas and supervised by Dr. Lance Peterson.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is: examine how social workers view the role of parents in their children's formal education and to explore how schools facilitate parent involvement and, conversely, how schools create barriers to parent involvement.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in a 30-minute interview which will be audio recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. All identifying information, such as names and locations, will be changed or redacted from the transcription.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

The study has no risks and the study has no direct benefits.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. Research records will be kept in a file cabinet in the researcher's home. I will also keep the electronic copy of the transcript in a password protected file on my computer. I will delete any identifying information from the transcript. Findings from the transcript will be presented in a public clinical research presentation. The audiotape and transcript will be destroyed by June 1, 2014.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used.

**Contacts and Questions**

My name is Nancy Joseph-Goldfarb. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 612-251-7463 or at jose9119@stthomas.edu. You may also contact my research committee chairperson, Dr. Lance Peterson, at 651-962-5800 or the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to be audiotaped.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Print Name of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**



## **Appendix B**

### Interview Questions

1. What are your views on the role of parents in their children's education at school?
2. What are some ways you see parents being involved in their children's education at school?
3. What are some ways you see parents being involved in their children's education outside of school?
4. In your experience, what challenges do parents face that make it difficult for them to be involved?
5. What complaints related to programming and other participation efforts do you hear from parents at your school?
6. In your view, does parent involvement vary by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic class? If so, how does it vary?
7. What frustrations do you have related to parent involvement in their children's education?
8. What's your understanding of how educational policy impacts parent involvement?
9. In your view, what role, if any, do social workers have to play in parent involvement in schools?

