Win the Game or Build Decent Humans? Parental Perceptions of the Family School-Relationship Across Socioeconomic Backgrounds

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Win the Game or Build Decent Humans?
Parental Perceptions of the Family School-Relationship Across Socioeconomic Backgrounds

A Dissertation Presented

By Elizabeth A. Dempsey Lee

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Lesley University

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Win the Game or Build Decent Humans? Parental Perceptions of the Family-School Relationship Across Socioeconomic Backgrounds

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Win the Game or Build Decent Humans? Parental Perceptions of the Family School-Relationship Across Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Abstract

Research into family engagement with schools states that the participation of a child’s family in schooling increases a student’s academic success. In education, family engagement is the newest policy tool to help children, especially those from marginalized communities, grow into successful adults. However, in sociology, intensive family engagement, defined as parental over-involvement in a child’s schooling, results in a narrow focus on traditional academic measures of success and the micromanaging of a child’s educational experience. Research indicates that this amped up oversight of a child’s education is the source of emotional, academic, psychological harm for children. As a result, parent involvement in education can be seen as either critical to or actively sabotaging a child’s future success. The purpose of this study was to use Standpoint Theory to examine the similarities and differences in perceptions of the family-school relationship among parents from various socioeconomic backgrounds with children attending public schools in communities with high incomes. Furthermore, this study explored how parents describe their relationship with their children’s schools and to what they attribute the positive, negative or neutral interactions. This study incorporates the survey responses of 115 parents living outside a large city on the East Coast and it also reflects the voices, apprehensions, and caring of seven parents from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds gathered through interviews. Data analysis resulted in conclusions related to how: 1) surveys benefit from qualitative context; 2) parental perceptions of the purpose of school varies by socioeconomic background; 3) intensive parenting creates stress in schools; 4) standpoint theory can reveal power dynamics within groups; and 5) parents in the higher income groups are more likely to be heard and this may be increasing inequity in these communities.

Key words: family engagement, intensive parenting, standpoint theory, parenting, mixed-methods
Dedication

For Chris, Amelia, Abby, James, Mom and Dad (and *w*)

For your patience with me, for your support, for your love.

It’s done!
Win the Game or Build Decent Humans? Parental Perceptions of the Family School-Relationship Across Socioeconomic Backgrounds

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* To Dr. Yvonne Liu-Constant and Dr. Lisa Jennings. You are the best committee a crazed, snail-paced mom/doctoral student could ask for. Thank you for your patience, your time with my work, and your feedback.

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* Jodi – so much love to you. It’s been a crazy 6 years for us both, but we’re still trucking along. Thank you for picking me back up. Every. Single. Time. Here’s to our celebratory coffee/hot cocoa!

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*Mom and Dad – Thank you for believing that I could finish. Love you so much.
* Joe and Sarah – “Randy lay there like a slug, it was his only defense”. “Gee Ricky, I’m really sorry your mom blew up.” and “Fra-gee-lay. Must be Italian.” xoxo

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** Special dedication to W.A.L with much love **
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Chapter One

Depending on who you talk to, parent involvement is either critical to or actively sabotaging a child’s future success. In education, family engagement is the newest policy tool to help children, especially those from marginalized communities, grow into successful adults. In sociology, intensive parenting, which features (in part) a narrow focus and amped up oversight on education, is the source of emotional, academic, psychological harm for kids.

For example, Emily, a single mother to three, “wants everyone to feel emotionally well, to have a deep sense of well-being, to feel happy and hopeful about life.” Over the five years she’s lived in this suburban town, she and her children have grappled with racism, mental health issues, and unresolved conflicts with her children’s schools. She prioritizes a relaxed and balanced approach to education, telling her children that “however well you do on any certain test… does not define who you are as a person. It’s important to do your best, and I will be there to help you.” To meet this goal, Emily does not push her children academically. She prioritizes exploration and a love of learning. “I would rather my kids love reading and love learning than feel like they have to do it according to these demands school makes on them.”

Nearby, Dan, married with two children, maintains that public schools are not for children who excel, “that’s not really its purpose.” He “pushes [his] kids to do more, to stay challenged, because otherwise they would be getting just the same work that everyone else would be getting.” To accomplish this, he and his wife “set up a rule in the house, four days a week, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday for your grade level times 10 minutes, you would spend in the workbook.” So, in 3rd grade 30 min, in 4th grade 40 min.” This approach to school serves two purposes: he assures that his children are ahead at school and they “learn to sit still.”
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The parents described above live in communities with average incomes of over $150,000/year. Their children attend public schools but here, the commonalities end. Dan’s income is above the median for his town, while Emily’s is below. Dan is married, Emily is single. Furthermore, their perceptions of what constitutes education are quite different. How can public schools reconcile these two approaches? What impact does each position have on the greater community? This study examines parent perceptions of the family-school relationship in communities with median incomes over $150,000/year with a specific focus on similarities and differences across the socioeconomic spectrum. For clarity, key terms are defined in Appendix A.

**General Concern – Studying Up**

The relationship between families and schools is complex, often contentious, and has a long and complicated history in the United States. In recent decades, this relationship has been brought to the forefront and made visible by the emergence of family engagement programs and policies that seek to leverage this relationship to improve educational outcomes for all students. Numerous studies have found a link between family engagement and educational successes such as better grades, higher graduation rates, better test scores, and consistent school attendance (Epstein, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, & SEDL, 2002; Henderson, 2007). These studies often focus on children and families in low-income communities and the programmatic and policy solutions emerging from these studies ask these families to do more for, and with, their students (Epstein, 2009).

Laura Nadar (1972), author of *Up the Anthropologist*, would consider this to be “studying down” (p. 284). In studying down, researchers study those unlike them from a position of relative power (Harding, 2005; Nader, 1972). For example, examining families with children
who have not reached desirable levels of academic achievement might reflect only the dominant perspective, that of the researcher, and result in one-sided policy recommendations. Studying down prioritizes the school’s agenda and defines student success primarily through comparison to the highest achieving children, most often in schools with abundant resources.

Studying up, on the other hand, opens the conversation because it includes all contextual elements (Nadar, 1972). In the case of family engagement, studying up or sideways looks at families in communities with high-incomes, as well as those with low-incomes, which allows researchers to ask “‘common sense’ questions in reverse” (p. 5). Thus, focus shifts away from the behavior of just one group and onto the context surrounding these groups and their interrelationships.

Studying up in family engagement must consider that school districts in high-income communities are “symbolic” (Lareau, Weininger, & Cox, 2018, p. 2) and serve as a benchmark for all public schools. In family engagement research, the distinction between studying down and studying up is critical because engagement expectations of parents create either a bridge or a barrier between them. This research studies up, down, and sideways, first considering the context of modern parenting in the United States through three lenses: historical, political and sociological. Context in the family-school relationship is critical because context influences the daily lives of students and their families. For this reason, understanding context is important, including understanding the context of how families, schools, and society characterizes a successful school experience.

**Context: The History of American Parenting**

Parenting work as it relates to education is invisible but important. Recognized or not, families, and their approach to child rearing, impact the school-family relationship. Not only does parenting differ throughout the world, it also varies geographically across the United States.
Parenting ideals are highly specific to local settings and evolve over time, as is evident in the history of American parenting (LeVine & LeVine, 2016).

**Parenting in a New Democracy**

Parents in the thirteen British colonies and afterwards, in the new American democracy, educated their own children, typically focusing on boys, basic skills, and religion (Hill & Taylor, 2004; LeVine & LeVine, 2016). Although the Massachusetts Bay Colony set the stage for public education with the Massachusetts Bay School Law (1642) and Old Deluder Satan Act (1647), it wasn’t until 1918 that public education was mandatory across the United States (Gutek, 2013). Therefore, for many years, most children were educated by their parents at home. However, in the period after the Revolutionary War, American parenting developed a distinctive focus that reflected the establishment of a new form of government in a land of seemingly limitless possibility (Fass, 2016).

Parents in the new United States quickly realized that old approaches to child rearing were a poor match for this new world. Instead, their parenting needed to embrace America’s freedom and “dazzling sense of change” (Fass, 2016, p. 1). Historian Paula Fass puts forth Thomas Cole’s *The Voyage of Life: Youth* (1842), second in a series of four paintings titled *The Four Ages of Man*, as representative of American parenting at this time (see Figure 1.1). It depicts a young man in a boat, moving towards a glittering, shining building with poise and confidence. Fass argues that this painting’s irrepressible energy and hopeful tone, exemplifies the “risk alongside glory” ideal evident in American parenting practices of the late 1700s and early 1800s.

Childhood in this new world was risky and unpredictable, with potential for great rewards. Above all, given the size of the United States and the scope of the American dream, parents realized that their children had to face this future on their own. Thus, parents identified
independence as the critical trait, and gave children “freedom and responsibility at a young age in the expectation that they would use it to become impendent citizens and innovative workers” (p. 44).

**Figure 1.1**

*The Voyage of Life: Youth*

![Image](image.png)

**The Rise of Science**

By the Victorian Era (1837-1901), the U.S. population had grown rapidly and expanded west. Engineering and science developed just as rapidly, resulting in new scientific discoveries and innovations. For example, the High Service Pumping Station was the second public water system in the United States, providing millions of gallons of water to Boston each day. Opened in Brookline, MA in 1887, with a brown stone façade and soaring, arched windows, it is an emblem of Victorian scientific progress. Its nickname, “The Tabernacle of Steam,” mirrors the period’s reverence for scientific understanding (see Figure 1.2). Moreover, this pumping station was the first in the nation to prevent the spread of disease by analyzing water quality with microscopes (Waterworks, n.d.).
The Tabernacle of Steam was part of an ongoing period of rapid scientific change that had momentous impact on public health policy. In turn, shifting public health policies influenced American parenting. Therefore, while Victorian Era parenting began with emphasis on teaching boys about risks and how to confront them, these ideas shifted alongside scientific development (Fass, 2016; LeVine & LeVine, 2016; Stearns, 2006). Improvements in drinking water, sewage treatment, and deeper understandings about the transmission and treatment of common diseases focused parents’ attention on public health (LeVine & LeVine, 2016; Stearns, 2003) and generated a societal aspiration for a “public responsibility for children” and a protective parental stance (LeVine & LeVine, 2016, p. 5).

**Figure 1.2**

The Waterworks Museum (Rosenthal, L., n.d.)

The Vulnerable Child

This aspiration succeeded. In the first half of the 20th century, infant mortality rates dropped from 100 deaths/1,000 in 1900, to 29.2 deaths per 1,000 by 1950, completing a drastic shift in parenting goals away from parenting for risk and independence and towards parenting for protection (LeVine & LeVine, 2016). By the beginning of the 20th century, parents were well aware of potential threats to their children, prompting the development of new fears and
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anxieties (Stearns, 2003). For example, a child’s development might be disrupted, negative emotions such as jealousy and grief might cause long-term psychological issues, bacteria and viruses might sicken children, and general safety became a concern, covering everything from kidnapping to dangers in the home (Stearns, 2003). Ironically, as science made our world safer, and child deaths decreased dramatically, parents felt more threatened (Stearns, 2006). By the 1920s, children were no longer expected to be capable and independent risk takers, instead, they were deemed fragile, defenseless, and in need of protection.

The Great Risk Shift

After the stock market crashed on October 29th, 1929, the United States entered the Great Depression. President Roosevelt created the Social Security Act (SSA) in 1935, which consisted of social insurance and social assistance programs. Aid for Dependent Children (ADC) was instituted under the Social Security Act and focused on low-income families. Roosevelt’s social programs initiated an “unspoken agreement,” a “three-way social contract among government, employers and workers” (Cooper, 2014, p. 29) that endured into the 1970s. During this period, the government implemented reasonable economic measures, provided education and training, and reduced regulation of businesses, while workers limited protests and companies offered fair wages, benefits and stability (p. 29). However, the rise of neoliberal policies in the 1970s slowly eroded this social compact and shifted responsibilities from the government to Americans. This “Great Risk Shift” reduced protections once provided by the government and the disappearance of these protections increased parental anxiety (p. 13). The dual growth of family responsibilities and anxiety sparked yet another evolution in child rearing practices.
Intensive Parenting

The “Great Risk Shift” made parents solely responsible for their child’s future and parenting evolved to meet this challenge (Cooper, 2014, p. 13). High-income parents wholeheartedly embraced the parenting responsibility shifted to them, believing that they both could, and should, parent to create a successful future adult. The dual tenets of infant and parent determinism undergird this belief (Füredi, 2001). Infant determinism asserts that a child’s development is critical to the success of the future adult. Any variance from what society deems “normal” can irreparably harm a child, and likewise, meeting a child’s needs will guarantee success. Its flip side is parental determinism, the idea that every action a parent takes reverberates into adulthood either for better or worse (Füredi, 2001).

These ideas minimize a child’s resilience, the diversity of human development, and the basic truth that there are “many kinds of normal” (LeVine & LeVine, 2016, p. 2). Infant and parent determinism, however widely embraced, are “cultural myths” (Füredi, 2001, p. 53). In actuality, parental influence is limited (LeVine & LeVine, 2016). A mother’s social class is correlated with future success, but parenting techniques are not (LeVine & LeVine, 2016). These cultural myths resulted in a highly interventionist style of parenting, which I’ll refer to as “intensive parenting” in this paper, adapting the phrase from Sharon Hays (1996) who coined the term “intensive mothering” (p. 4). And while plenty of research indicates that mothers are primarily responsible for parenting, this paper looks at intensity of parenting practices regardless of sex or gender.

Parents in communities with higher-than-average incomes are the primary adopters of this ideology, described in a later section. However, as American parenting transitioned from independence to vulnerability, and to responsibility, the stage was set for intensive parenting, a style of parenting characterized by low-risk, high academic pressure, and rigid adherence to
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societal expectations (Crozier, 2000; Füredi, 2001; Karsten, 2015). Intensive parenting is local and reflects “the norms of the micro community” (LeVine & LeVine, 2016, p. 186). This intensity set the stage for intensive parenting, a Pygmalion quest to create The Ideal Child.

**Context: Neoliberal Ideas in Parenting**

Why are high income American parents compelled to sculpt their children into models of successful adults? How did American parenting come to exemplify the myth of Pygmalion? In Ovid’s telling, Pygmalion sculpts the statue of an ideal woman with which he promptly falls in love. The goddess of love, Venus, hears his pleas and brings the statue, named Galatea, to life. Likewise, some American parents build visions of their successful children in their imaginations and then work to bring those visions to life. I argue that these parenting ideals are rooted, not only in the unique history of the United States, but also in the emergence of neoliberal political thought in the United States.

Mike Konczal (2017), fellow at the Roosevelt Institute, outlines the multiple meanings of “neoliberal.” For example, it is sometimes used as a broad term for liberals. In political circles, it refers to an ideologic shift in the Democratic party during the 1980s and, in academic circles, it refers to the belief in the supremacy of a market-based economy. This paper uses primarily the economic definition of neoliberalism, referring to a specific set of economic policies in use from the 1970s through present day (Konczal, 2017). Specifically, neoliberalism is:

- an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere. Neoliberals champion privatization of social goods, withdrawal of government from provision of
social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient (Lipman, 2011, p. 6).

In particular, the neoliberal concepts of individualism and the primacy of the free market, including the drive to privatize public institutions, suffuse American ideas about children and education (Lipman, 2011). The administrations of Presidents Ronald Reagan (1980-1988) and George H. W. Bush (1989-1993) realigned educational policy along neoliberal ideals. By the 1990s, educational policies incorporated many neoliberal ideals including individualism and free market solutions (David, 1993), accelerating the “Great Risk Shift”, previously discussed (Cooper, 2015, p. 13). Table 1.1 outlines educational policies and their relationship to two specific neoliberal ideas - individualism and the primacy of the free market (Caputo, 2007; Lipman, 2011).

Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Policy</th>
<th>Neoliberal Tenet</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cutting budgets of social programs (inc. education)</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Families, not the government are responsible for educating children and caring for others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreasing equity programs</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Success is making it on your own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational standards/testing</td>
<td>Free market</td>
<td>Markets should inform standards because schools create workers/ the free market can provide materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vouchers/charters</td>
<td>Individualism and privatization, free market</td>
<td>The free market, especially elements of competition, will improve education and also allow families choice to make to suit their own educational needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family takes bigger role in education</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Families are ultimate responsible for the success or failure of their child.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These policies resulted in education that hinges “on parental socio-economic circumstances, area of residence, ability to make demands on individual schools, as well as the intellectual ability and desire to be educated” (David, 1993, pp. 74-75). As education adopted neoliberal positions, parenting also changed.

**Children as Choice: Individualism’s Effect on Parenting and Education**

Neoliberalism positions children as a choice and therefore the full responsibility of the family and not the government (Fass, 2016; Lavee & Benjamin, 2015). As such, parents are expected to manage the challenges of child rearing, including education, on their own. This go-it-alone orientation is an “ideology of meritocracy…the idea that positions are earned through hard work and personal achievement and through no resources other than one’s own” (Shapiro, 2004, p. 77). Conversely, Americans also hold no responsibility for children other than their own (Gillies, 2007).

However, individualism is contradictory in two ways: 1) individualism is simultaneously “the problem and the solution,” and 2) individualism is inherently unequal (Gillies, 2007, p. 149). First, if families have both freedoms and responsibilities which are separate from government regulation, in theory, parents should be free to parent and educate their children however they prefer. In fact, policies such as family engagement limit this freedom by placing demands on families to parent and educate “correctly,” as defined by the U.S. government (p.148). For example, Doucet (2011) notes that while family engagement policies strive to connect home and school, Haitian families actively resist, believing that American schools are a poor influence on their children. Here, the beliefs of the family stand in direct contrast to the goals of a policy. According to individualism, these families should be free to follow their own path to education, but neoliberal policies sometimes judge individual desires and override them.
Second, individual self-interest as a basis for parenting is inherently unequal because some parents have greater resources, such as money, time, education, and social capital. In fact, in certain communities, this focus on individualism is magnified and encourages competition among parents who “desire their kids to be better than others” (Kohn, 1998, p. 1). Moreover, the United States government, like that in the United Kingdom, has “an almost evangelical faith in the power of parenting to compensate for social disadvantage,” but provides few resources to help parents do this job (Gillies, 2007, p. 150; Stearns, 2003). When children are viewed as the responsibility of individuals rather than a community responsibility, human behavior shifts to meet these expectations. Therefore, not only do parenting priorities change, but in a free market economy, as in the United States, businesses step in to provide families with options to meet their parenting obligations.

**Fear and the Free Market: Supplemental Educational Activities**

“Our culture is distinguished by an ethic of individualism as well as a tendency to collapse all human interaction and most matters of public policy into economic laws” (Kohn, 1998, p. 5). Belief in the primacy of the free market is neoliberalism’s most fundamental tenet and, since the 1970s, this belief has shifted education from a community focus to a client/business relationship defined by economic exchange (Crozier, 2000). For parents in the middle- and upper-classes, parenting, anxiety, and the free market are comingled. Full responsibility for a child’s success or failure turns parenting into a high stakes venture with no room for error. If intensive parenting is rooted in the fear of a child’s failure (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012), educational businesses step into this void, simultaneously feeding this fear and offering products to assure success. Educational businesses offer parents “ritual objects” with “magical powers” (Nadesan, 2002, p. 415). The underlying promise is “every child can be a superchild if s/he is exposed to the ‘correct’
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stimulation at the proper developmental moment” (p. 413). The free market fuels a cycle; parents worry, educational companies reinforce parent fears, and then sell parents a solution (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). These pressures place an educational burden on families; in order to be successful, they must teach, they must become didactic parents. Didactic parenting is a big business and reassurance comes with a hefty price tag.

The Russian School of Mathematics: Didactic Parenting, Anxiety, and the Free Market Collide

Supplemental educational classes are one path through which parents in the middle class try to preserve their child’s socioeconomic status (Vincent & Ball, 2007). Companies exploit the deep sense of fear felt by families regarding their children’s future. A quick Google search of the Metro West suburbs of Boston reveal at least three supplemental mathematics franchises - Kumon, Mathnesium, and the Russian School of Mathematics (RSM), and countless smaller programs. There are also numerous science and engineering programs, and innumerable sports opportunities, from “travel team” competitive soccer, to a world-famous ballet school, and more. However, these companies exacerbate inequity. While all families care about their children and worry about their children’s futures, only families who can afford these programs are able to use these supplemental programs to support their child’s future. For example, tuition for RSM in the greater Boston area ranges from $1,500 to $3,100 for classes during the school year. Summer programming is an additional cost (Tuition, n.d.).

RSM provides a vivid illustration of this cycle of fear and profit. On their website they state: “public schools in the United States face an impossible challenge of teaching mathematics in diverse classrooms without any systematic curriculum. As the world grows flatter, even our best suburban schools continue to struggle when ranked on an international level” [Emphasis
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added] ("Why RSM?," n.d.). A close look at math scores on two international tests, the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) and the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMMS), demonstrate problems with the assertion above. That assertion is widely believed, but untrue. While the average international math scores in the United States are low (470 on the PISA and 509 on TIMMS), the state of Massachusetts fares much better (500 on PISA and 561 on TIMMS). According to TIMMS data, the average Massachusetts student is statistically equal to Japan and trails only or South Korea, Singapore, Chinese Taipei and Hong Kong (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013, p. v).

Among Massachusetts communities, the “best suburban schools” performed even better. Disaggregated by socioeconomic status, districts in communities with significant economic resources scored 542 on PISA and 589 on TIMMS, pushing these students even higher in this international comparison. And what about Russia? Should Massachusetts students learn Russian Math instead of Massachusetts Math? The average Massachusetts student scored higher on both tests than their peers in Russia (494 PISA, 539 TIMMS). Table 1.2 illustrates this.
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Table 1.2

*PISA and TIMMS Scores in Mathematics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/Location</th>
<th>PISA</th>
<th>TIMMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Income Massachusetts Communities</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Hong Kong/Macau/Taipei</td>
<td>548/544/542</td>
<td>586/na/609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Russian School of Mathematics epitomizes the cycle parents face regarding education. Parents worry over their child’s education. Supplemental educational companies reinforce this anxiety and offer a service to ameliorate a problem which, in some cases, doesn’t even truly exist. The effects of this cycle are extensive. Parents worry more and their parenting changes. Children face more pressure to succeed academically and experience more stress (Luthar, Barkin, & Crossman, 2013). Schools are tarnished by an over-simplified narrative about education which then asserts pressure on teachers, administrators, districts, and the curriculum. Didactic Parenting is a response to the problems American parents believe their children will face in the future. However, as indicated in the example above, context is central to understanding these problems. Without context, issues, and their solutions risk oversimplification.
The Naivete of Neoliberalism

Although on the surface, requiring each family to be responsible for themselves makes sense, individualism and the free market present problems when applied to education. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2013) suggests that libertarianism, similar to neoliberalism, is naïve because both political belief systems assume that everyone is equal in life, schooling, pay, and social treatment and that humans are logical actors. As indicated above, RSM’s tuition alone likely excludes many families, exposing one area of inequality. Additionally, families differ in many ways and one family’s rational approach is another family’s irrationality. Thus, studying up, down and sideways becomes critical when considering schools, families and children.

Context: Sociology of the Family

Historical and political perspectives provide important context when considering family engagement programs and policies. Likewise, sociology of the family, in particular how diversity among families influences parenting and schooling, offers further background. For example, race, ethnicity, and gender influence school relationships. The negative impact racial issues have on society and schooling is well documented (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Rothstein, 2004; Shapiro, 2004). For example, teacher beliefs about the racial and ethnic backgrounds of their families determine how and if they become involved, and non-dominant parents tend to be seen negatively (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013). This “deficit approach” is aimed at “training” parents in methods that are often entrenched in the prevailing norms in the dominant culture of schools and teachers (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Ishimaru et al., 2014). Additionally, sometimes non-dominant families are actively engaged in their child’s education but use methods that go unrecognized by the school (Auerbach, 2007; Doucet, 2011). Lastly, and perhaps most problematic, some research indicates that while family involvement in middle and high school is important, benefits do not distribute equally across multiple categories,
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including race, ethnicity, socio-economic status and parent educational level (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Robinson & Harris, 2014).

Similarly, a parent’s gender also is a significant factor in the family-school relationship (Caputo, 2007; Crozier, 2000; David, 1993; Fass, 2016; Gillies, 2007; Reay, 2005). The majority of research about parenting focuses on heterosexual couples or single parents. Therefore, the ideas discussed below may not apply to parents in same sex partnerships. Family engagement research states that participation of the entire family, parents, siblings, extended family members and more - increases a student’s academic success (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 2011; Henderson, 2007; Henderson, Mapp, & SEDL, 2002; Mapp, 2003). However, research into family life reveals that mothers in the United States are primarily accountable for the daily lives of their children (Coltrane, 1996; Lareau, 2000; Walzer, 1996). Although fathers are involved, they are secondary to their wives who actively manage. Instead of managing, fathers “help,” often with nudging and explicit instructions from their wives (Coltrane, p. 74). Therefore, if women hold principal responsibility for children, household matters and relationships, and fathers play a secondary role, then family engagement functionally means mother engagement. Cole (2007) notes this problem with definition, “the word parent is simple but misleading, it obscures gender roles in families and therefore also in the home-school relationship” (p. 165). Parenting, in fact, really means “mothering” (p. 169).

Race, ethnicity and gender are important factors in family engagement. However, the intersection of family engagement, parenting, and socio-economic status, especially affluence, is less well studied. The next section explores how parenting and socio-economic status influence the family-school relationship. However, the ideas presented in next section are trends which apply to many, but not all families. Class traits are not monolithic and all-encompassing because
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parenting behavior varies greatly, even within socioeconomic background (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Li & Fischer, 2017).

**Socioeconomic Status, Parents, and Schools**

Social class influences the family-school relationship in many ways (Cheadle & Amato, 2011; Dumais, Kessinger, & Ghosh, 2012; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Robinson & Harris, 2014). First, many of the strategies promoted to engage families ignore potential obstacles created by class differences (Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Families with higher incomes relate to schools in different ways than families who earn less. For example, research suggests that both parent educational level and social class influence a teacher’s perception of students. Educators display more positive attitudes towards families from middle-class backgrounds (Dumais et al., 2012).

Correspondingly, researchers uncovered a relationship between educational level, job flexibility, and ease of engaging with schools. Parents with higher incomes are more likely to have higher levels of education. They are also more likely to have jobs with greater flexibility. These factors can result in more frequent interaction with a child’s school. Families with higher incomes, therefore, may have an easier time engaging with the schools (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Shumar, 1996).

Furthermore, the benefits of family engagement also appear to vary based on socioeconomic background (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Li & Fischer, 2017). Li’s (2015) review dives into family engagement data, analyzing “four waves of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class (ECLS-K), from 2000-2007” and confirms this idea; more family engagement does not always result in better outcomes.
Family engagement research suggests that families want to be involved because parents want their children to have every advantage in life (Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Johnston, Gupta, Hagelskamp, & Hess, 2013). In Unequal Childhoods, Lareau (2011) explores the relationship between social class and parenting approaches. She determines that parents in the middle- and upper-classes practice what she calls “concerted cultivation,” while working class parents practice the “natural accomplishment of growth” (pp. 2-3). Middle-class parents cultivate their children through parenting, and in doing so prepare children for the school and work by teaching logical thinking, social skills (e.g., shaking hands, looking people in the eye), and prioritizing work. Working class and poor parents, on the other hand, tend to subscribe to the “accomplishment of natural growth,” which allows children freedom to follow their desires, create their own entertainment, and solve their own social problems. Significantly, families of different socioeconomic backgrounds do not necessarily share the same beliefs about raising children. Lareau emphasizes that both approaches have positive and negative outcomes. Although Lareau states that neither is better than the other, “concerted cultivation” has emerged as a preferred parenting approach.

**Studying up: Parenting and Income**

Historical, political and sociological factors influence how families and schools relate. Ignoring these factors risks programs and policies that oversimplify what families do and do not need. This next section examines how middle- and upper-class parenting practices have become the symbolic of “good” parenting and amount to an invisible yet dominant expectation for all parents. I argue that these assumptions unknowingly inform family engagement policy and practices and prioritize middle- and upper-class parenting ideology. However, we cannot know this without studying up, down and sideways.
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Elite districts, defined by Lareau (2018) are districts comprised of families with not only ample financial resources but also “abundant non-economic resources” (p. 1). Lareau asserts that these districts are “highly symbolic” and serve as a benchmark for all public schools (p. 2). Studying up, that is, studying these high performing districts and their families, shifts attention away from a single group and onto the contexts in which these groups interrelate. As models, elite districts require scrutiny to assure that family engagement does not unwittingly import middle- and upper-class practices to other families and assume they will work.

There is a growing body of information regarding parenting trends in the middle and upper-classes. However, as with all research, the trends described below are true for many high socioeconomic families but not all (Lavee & Benjamin, 2015; Luthar et al., 2013). Nor does this preclude parents of other social class from engaging in this style of parenting. These parenting trends are just that – trends. It is important to not overinterpret and over-apply these ideas.

That said, what does parenting in these communities look like? High-income parenting can be described as rooted in the “sense of urgency and responsibility” parents in middle- and upper-class communities have about their children (Vincent & Ball, 2007, p. 1061). Parents, particularly mothers tend to “take control” of a child’s life and actively manage their future (Reay, 2005, p. 109). This approach requires significant resources, including money, time and education (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Moreover, it’s often coupled with a perfectionism and anxiety that renders its goals impossible to achieve (Luthar et al., 2013).

Nadesan (2002) argues that current parenting approaches vastly overstate the importance of early brain growth and the ability of parents to either harm or enhance it. She rejects the idea that “every child can be a superchild if s/he is exposed to the ‘correct’ stimulation at the proper developmental moment” (p. 413). Nadeson blames the media for misinterpreting studies,
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misleading the public and encouraging intense, controlling parenting. Additionally, many politicians have embraced intensive parenting as a plausible way to solve society’s problems, embedding these ideas into social policies, such as education.

Infant and parent determinism as discussed previously, have left parents in higher socioeconomic classes clamoring for knowledge that the educational market provides. This information is ubiquitous, often contradictory (Füredi, 2001; LeVine & LeVine, 2016) and frequently based on research that is either “driven by an explicit agenda” or “validates prevailing cultural practices” (Füredi, 2001, p. 170). This research typically focuses on WEIRD countries, that is Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Developed (Gopnik, 2016; LeVine & LeVine, 2016) resulting in a lop-sided, limited, culturally-bound view of how parents should care for children.

Too much engagement?

Modern parenting’s hyper-focus on adult success acknowledges only a narrow band of acceptable outcomes and many are considered achievable through education. Parental focus on education ignores an important nuance - getting a child into an elite college is not the same as either educating a child or preparing a child for adult life (Kohn, 1998, p. 6). Parents in communities with significant financial resources often conflate these ideas, resulting in frenetic activity geared towards college acceptance. Middle and high school students do ballet, math competitions, traveling soccer teams, clubs, internships, apply for gifted programming and more, in an expensive and time-consuming “game of academic one-upmanship” (p. 6). Kohn refers to these intense requirements as “Preparation H” (p. 6). The H, of course, stands for Harvard, and Kohn’s pun implies that preparation solely to gain entrance to an elite school is the educational equivalent of hemorrhoidal treatments. This approach to parenting has many names both in
popular culture, and in academia. Table 1.3 presents many of these terms, their origins and their definitions.

Table 1.3

Terms for High Pressure Parenting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tiger mother</td>
<td>Chua (2011)*</td>
<td>The belief that “academic achievement reflects successful parenting” (p. 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helicopter parent</td>
<td>(Cline &amp; Fay, 1990)</td>
<td>Overinvolved and overprotective parenting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerted Cultivation</td>
<td>Lareau (2011)</td>
<td>“Deliberately try to stimulate their child’s development and foster their cognitive and social skills” (p. 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive mothering</td>
<td>Hayes (1996)</td>
<td>“The expectation that mothers should give of themselves and their resources unconditionally, including but not limited to mothers’ time, money, emotional support and love” (p. 112).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child as a project</td>
<td>Vincent &amp; Ball (2007)</td>
<td>“The child is soft, malleable and able to be improved”. The “good parent’ provides a range of educational experiences” (p. 1065).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Karsten (2015)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(p. 117)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation H</td>
<td>Kohn (1998)</td>
<td>“A ceaseless effort to prepare… children for Harvard”. Parents “weigh every decision about what their children do in school, or even after school, against the yardstick of what it might contribute to future success”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parenting Out of Control</td>
<td>Nelson (2010)</td>
<td>“Parents are carefully guiding, shaping, and determining the contours of their children’s actions” (p. 11). It “consumes the lives of parents who adopt it, often at the expense of other meaningful relationships” (p. 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A carpenter</td>
<td>Gopnik (2016)</td>
<td>“Shape that material [the child] into a final product that will fit the scheme you had in mind to begin with” (p. 18).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. * Chua did not intend the book to be a celebration of this style of parenting, but the term “tiger mother” has come to symbolize this approach regardless (Szalai, 2014).

Terms describing high pressure, high anxiety parenting have proliferated over the past decade as this approach to raising children has emerged into public conversation. Parents have simultaneously embraced and decried these strategies.

**Fear and Control**

While amusing and evocative, these titles carry negative connotations. Although these terms are nuanced and not precisely equivalent, they share two main characteristics - fear and control. Fass (2016) notes that Americans have always been worried parents, however, beginning in the 1980s, parenting anxiety increased. As childhood dangers decreased, middle-class parents became “insulated from the real-life experiences of the less privileged” (p. 222). Without “deep and abiding” problems to worry over, middle- and upper-class parents became anxious about “perfection problems,” spending money to address the surface, not the substance (p. 224).
Historian Peter Stearns (2006) argues that fear is a feature in societies across the world, however, like Fass (2016), he sees American fear as unique in its intensity. He notes that because fear clouds rationale thought, it has and continues to influence both policy and group behavior. Parents perceive many threats, such as disrupting development, overly strong emotions, physical health (e.g. exercise, germs, general safety), including fear of kidnapping and even the home, which requires expert child-proofing. Failure to protect children has always been a parenting failure.

Ana Villalobos (2014), author of *Motherload: Making It All Better in Insecure Times*, and Margaret Nelson (2010), author of *Parenting Out of Control: Anxious Parents in Uncertain Times*, connect intensive parenting to anxiety. Specifically, Villalobos sees intensive mothering as an extension of gender roles for women. This focus on “domesticity” results in an increase in “the subjective importance of the mother-child relationship” (p. 12). Villalobos argues that the process of enacting the dominant ideology of mothering confers a feeling of safety to mother and child, and other authors conclude that control of one’s environment also enhances a feeling of safety (Caputo, 2007; Nelson, 2010; Warner, 2005).

Likewise, Nelson (2010) maintains that parental anxiety is imbedded in and responsive to a “culture of fear” (p. 16) experienced by parents and fashioned from apprehension about the perceived dangers of the modern world and a wistful longing for the perceived security of the past. Parents embrace intensive parenting in the form of “constant oversight, belief in children’s boundless potential, intimacy with children, claims of trust and delayed launching” (p. 174) as ways to enact the dominant paradigm of “good mother,” achieve societal acceptance, and thereby mitigate their anxiety.
Intensive parenting, then, is the rationale by which parents in high-income communities justify controlling their children, which alleviates their anxiety and creates a sense of security. Marianne Cooper (2014), author of *Cut Adrift: Families in Insecure Times*, argues that deep economic insecurity underlies parents’ fears. She targets the economic recession of the 2000s as a turning point because, by this point, neoliberal policies had dismantled much of American social safety nets that “shifted the job of creating and maintaining security” from the government onto people, creating “one nation under worry” (p. 17). *Cut Adrift* explores the coping mechanisms used by people in different socioeconomic backgrounds as they handled the economic strain of the most recent recession. Those at the highest income levels, she notes, showed the most fear. These parents are “perpetually dissatisfied” (p. 101) and focused on “their children’s schooling in order to mollify their doubts about the economic future” (p. 109). Economic instability creates fear and anxiety among parents in middle- and upper-classes, which in turn leads to a “process of perfecting children” as a coping mechanism (p. 116). Families have always been involved with the education of the children although the nature of this involvement evolved over time. Today’s normative view of parenting involves high levels of awareness and control in order to prepare children for an uncertain future. Do these strategies work? How do children who experience didactic parenting fare?

**Outcomes of Didactic Parenting**

Research indicates that intensive parenting can lead to poor outcomes for children and their families. For example, children in middle- and upper-class communities are at a higher risk for “elevated maladjustment” (Ciciolla, Curlee, Karageorge, & Luthar, 2017; Luthar et al., 2013, p. 1529). Of course, intensive parenting does not result in *all children* struggling, but it does put them at much higher risk than their peers in other social classes (Ciciolla, Curlee, et al., 2017; Luthar et al., 2013).
It was a rainy summer day at my elementary engineering camp in an affluent Boston suburb. Seven-year-old Ben [pseudonym] and I were building a construction paper tower, trying to build as high as possible using nothing but masking tape. The other nine campers were focused, building, and chatting. Soon, talk turned to Kumon and Russian Math. Ben began to interview his camp mates: “Do you do Russian Math or Kumon?” he asked. To his shock, only one other student did any math program. Ben spluttered, indignant and confused, “But, but! You have to do extra math! If you don’t do math you won’t get into a good college and if you don’t get into a good college, you won’t have a good life!” This idea, no doubt adopted from Ben’s family, had become a mantra, organizing a distasteful activity into a meaningful future. His discomfort with the idea that some children did not do extra math classes underscored his winner-take-all rationale. His statement seemed emblematic of this community’s intense focus on learning. However, I wondered whether this intense focus on academic achievement actually resulted in success.

The vignette above indicates the pervasiveness of didactic parenting in some communities. Ben’s age is noteworthy. At seven years old, he has absorbed the language and rationale of the didactic parenting approach and he sees this topic as appropriate for public discussion. Research indicates that the effects of didactic parenting are evident as early as grade 6 and include a variety of negative outcomes: higher levels of risky behaviors; alcohol abuse; marijuana and other drugs; promiscuousness, smoking, and psychological stress including depression and anxiety (Ciciolla, Curlee, et al., 2017; Li, Obach, & Cheng, 2015; Luthar et al., 2013; Warner, 2005). Moreover, this negative behavior lasts through college. Girls show more severe results than boys because they are under additional societal pressures including expectations of
perfection in behavior and appearance (Ciciolla, Curlee, Karageorge, & Luthar, 2017; Luthar et al., 2013). Pressure from mothers also increases the likelihood of poor outcomes for girls.

Family engagement research typically does not consider whether the value of engagement has a limit. Educators assume that if some family engagement is good, more family engagement must be better (Li, 2015). However, recent research casts doubt on this. “Parental over-involvement in cultural cultivation, educational expectations, and parental communication may lead to diminishing and even negative effects on children’s outcomes” (Li et al., 2015, p. 27). For example, Li et al. assert that family engagement has an “inflection point,” after which the positives outcomes wane and the negative outcomes increase (p. 13).

Because human relationships are complicated, it is hard to measure precisely where this inflection occurs, but some trends emerge. Research suggests that the focus of a parent’s attention matters. Students are more successful when parents prioritize intrinsic motivations such as areas of deep interest and passion, instead of extrinsic motivations like grades, college acceptance, and future career (Ciciolla, et al., 2017). Children whose parents equally valued success, and prosocial behaviors, and those who valued prosocial elements above success were both psychologically healthier and academically more successful. (Ciciolla et al., 2017). From the anecdote above, it appears that Ben’s family believes that supplemental mathematics classes are necessary for both college and for life. They are prioritizing extrinsic motivations in a zero-sum game of “do math or fail.” Later, Ben told me that he hates both RSM and math in general, anecdotal evidence of the unintended consequences of intensive parenting.

When a parent’s focus is extrinsic, for example on academic performance, this creates pressure. Middle- and upper-class communities often subscribe to Kohn’s (1998) “Preparation H” believing that “there is one path to ultimate happiness-having money-that in turn comes from
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attending prestigious colleges” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 1531). These messages are omnipresent, existing both implicitly and explicitly as students approach college and focus shifts away from learning and towards “impressive school resumes” and multiple afterschool activities (p. 1532). This “high-octane achievement performance” (p. 1532) creates significant pressure on teens, who in turn, engage in risky behaviors to reduce their stress. This cycle leads to “elevated levels of maladjustment” (Ciciolla, et al., 2017, p. 1058).

Intensive parenting results in negative outcomes for adults, too. Sociologist Tiffani Chin’s (2000) study of the private high school admission process in an economically privileged Southern Californian community suggests that parents engage in “deep acting,” that is taxing emotional work to keep their own emotions hidden from their children. Likewise, parents work hard to encourage and protect their children throughout a challenging process (p. 152). Moreover, intensive parenting can lead to adverse emotional outcomes for mothers, including increased stress and “lower life satisfaction” (Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2013, p. 615), and higher levels of depression. Fathers engaged in intensive parenting practices focus on earning money and are absent from home more often. They are at work earning money to keep family secure (Cooper, 2014).

Luthar et al. (2017) summarize the circular feedback of intensive parenting as, “I can, therefore I must, achieve: strive for the top, to attain what my parents achieved. This is central, imperative life goal; nothing else is important. Without success, I will be left behind as a failure, as others soar to great heights” (p. 15). These factors combine to create high anxiety in parents (Stearns, 2003). In turn, parents confuse their own issues and concerns with those of their children (Füredi, 2001). Affluent school districts are “symbolic” and provide a roadmap for other schools, whether merited or not (Lareau et al., 2018, p. 2). In addition to modeling high
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academic achievement, are elite schools also disseminating a specific, narrow, style of parenting? Moreover, if these narrow parenting ideals fail significant numbers of students, might they be counterproductive for students of other backgrounds, too? These questions expose areas of disagreement between sociological and educational research into the family-school relationship.

Specific Problem

There is a conflict between the educational and sociological research on the ways that families and schools relate with each other. Moreover, there is nuance within both bodies of literature. In educational circles, there is a tendency to study down, rather than up or sideways.

These trends leave us stranded in a sea of questions – if family engagement works well for some families but is harmful to others, how can a district best enact family engagement policies? Is there relationship between parenting practices, schools, and family engagement? Of the many types of diversity among families (e.g., race, language, education level, socioeconomic status), which have most influence, for whom, and why? If districts in high-income communities serve as models, will importing intensive parenting practices to other communities work, and - if yes - is it the right thing to do?

We know that addressing the family-school relationship through family engagement works in many ways. We know that these same approaches can create problems and we can’t be sure which mechanisms work for which families and why. Therefore, we don’t know how to craft policy to address differences among families and we don’t know how to identify which families will benefit. Lastly, we don’t know how these ideas/approaches might shift on a regional basis.

The purpose of this mixed-methods sequential explanatory study was to explore aspects of family engagement. I sought to discover whether socioeconomic status contributes to a family’s
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positive and/or negative perceptions of the family-school relationship in public school systems in communities with a median household income of $150,000 per year or higher.

Summary

Studying models of family engagement informs our practice, therefore studying up must occur alongside studying down. In the case of the family-school relationship, studying up, down, and sideways reveals the potential for socioeconomic bias. Economist Richard Rothstein (2004) points out that “middle class parent’s behavioral expectations align to schools, [while the] lower class is in conflict.” Lareau (2011) echoes a similar note, suggesting that some parenting practices, such as sending a child to RSM, “are simply privileged more than others” (p. 344). Consequently, programs that focus on families may have intensive parenting expectations as unwitting foundations of their program design. Imagine the impact this might have on family engagement programming: a family-oriented program in the public schools might, by default, best engage those whose parenting style aligns with the school’s expectations. Conversely, such programs might not be able to engage families with parenting styles that conflict with expectations. Since the stated goal of family engagement is to engage families, identifying and understanding areas of affiliation and divergence are critically important to meeting this goal.

Intensive parenting requires heavy resources and all parents do not have equal resources (Lareau, 2011). For example, families in low-income communities have complicated work-family balance problems that often limit their resources. In The Three Faces of Work-Family Conflict: The Poor, the Professionals, and the Missing Middle, Williams and Boushay (2010) outline some of these conflicts, including: difficulty managing the high cost of childcare; work hours that limit interaction time with family; work schedules in constant flux; a lack of sick days and family leave; and “fragile patchworks of care” - childcare that is inconsistent from day to
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day and more likely to fall through (p.13). These complicating factors lead to “exceptionally high levels of work-family conflict” (p. 11) as compared with families in other economic classes. Because of these conflicts, poor families have less - less family time, less job stability and less financial stability.

This leads to fundamental questions about family engagement policies and programs. Modern expectations of parents have emerged from the unique evolution of historical parenting practices in the United States, rising neoliberal political thought, and sociological differences among diverse families. Evidence indicates that school expectations are class-specific and assume that all families share the values of and behave like middle- and upper-class families. Moreover, these expectations assume that if all families embrace these intensive parenting practices, they will share the same outcomes.

This chapter explored two problems with this logic. First, intensive parenting practices do not appear to universally confer benefits to all children. Family context matters. Second, intensive parenting practices do not appear to confer benefits to all middle- and upper-class children. Instead, intensive parenting results in negative outcomes for a significant number of children. These ideas complicate family engagement programs and policies and prompt further study of family engagement in high-income communities. The following questions guide my research:

- To what extent do a school’s policies and programs privilege intensive parenting approaches?
- Given that family engagement appears to have some positive impact, what specific factors have positives outcomes for whom, and why? Which have negative outcomes for whom, and why?
• Is it the responsibility of families to make up for educational losses associated with societal inequities such as discrimination, school funding disparities and lack of health care and housing?

• Can family involvement truly overcome issues created by insufficient financial resources?

• Does the individualistic nature of intensive parenting allow people to “ignore the plight of other’s children” in favor of their own (Füredi, 2001, p. 122) and how might this impact the family-school relationship and American society?
Chapter Two

Philosopher Elizabeth Minnich (2004) argues that society preserves prevailing culture and reinforces societal inequalities through “dominant meaning systems” (p. 52). She goes on to state that while “educational institutions…are not the only shapers and guardians” (p. 59) of the dominant perspective, they are the primary ones. Family engagement policy and programming emerged from a transformation in thinking about how families can and should interact with schools. The shift to increased parent involvement has the potential to transform education. At the same time, as the value of family engagement becomes established and codified into policy, its preferred strategies and approaches become part of Minnich’s “dominant meaning system.”

This literature review considers four areas: the historical highlights of the school-family relationship, basic findings, important conceptual models and frameworks, and broader contextual complications. Lastly, this paper uses Minnich’s (2004) “dominant meaning systems” as a way to evaluate whether family engagement research supports, or breaks away from, existing norms.

Historical Highlights of the Family-School Relationship

“Ye ould deluder, Satan, to keepe men from knowledge of ye Scriptures” (Gutek, 2013, p. 10). In the 1630s and 1640s, the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony began to fear their children were not sufficiently devout. They believed that Satan was interfering with the religious and moral education of their children, thereby clouding the next generation’s understanding of the truth (as defined by colony leaders) (Gutek, 2013). Coming to the New World wrought significant changes, not least of which was parenting in the wilderness. These changes brought new and unexpected challenges that prompted a shift in the parent/child relationship (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). Consequently, by the mid-1600s, concerns about a lack of filial piety inspired
laws intended to remedy the problem. *The Mass Bay School Law of 1642*, required children to be sufficiently literate to understand, and presumably comply with, religious doctrine and laws. *The Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647* formalized educational requirements by compelling towns with more than 50 families to hire a schoolmaster. This became the first law in the United States to require public, formal schooling. Both laws had long-term impact on the American educational system by setting the dual expectations of an educated populace and of family involvement in education (Gutek, 2013).

Although families have been involved in schooling since the inception of the United States, expectations and roles have shifted according to the educational philosophies of different eras. In *Parents and Schools: The 150 Year Struggle for Control in American Education*, historian William Cutler (2000) observes that during the colonial era, families themselves were “all purpose” institutions, fulfilling all roles from parent to educator to apprenticeship (p. 1). In areas where schooling was required, local families funded and oversaw schools. Thus, families had to be deeply involved in the schooling of their children (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

However, by the end of the 19th century, the roles of family and teacher had evolved. Family influence waned and schools began to actively coordinate relationships with families, discovering that proactive management of parents by schools reduced conflicts (Cutler, 2000). The family–school relationship became one-dimensional, a continuum with “no involvement” on one end and “acceptable involvement” on the other. Schools defined parent roles and parents conformed. This shift forced parents into an ambiguous role, one Cutler describes as “neither decision makers nor troublemakers” (p. 40). Families supported the school but only within the boundaries provided by the school.
Cutler (2004) identifies persistent historical themes that are relevant today. First, he states that the family-school relationship has always been controversial and remains “unsettled” (p. 200). Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978) agrees, noting that “themes of disintegration and struggle” have been ever-present in this relationship (p. 16). Next, Cutler notes that parents are still not part of the educational establishment, despite the fact that the majority of parents desire involvement. Lastly, he suggests that because Americans universally accept that the home influences schooling, the nature of the family-school relationship will remain subject to intense debate (p. 199). These themes provide context for intense focus on the role of the family-school relationship in education over the past 30 years as family engagement research becomes policy.

From 1647 to present day, these ideas have been embedded in state and national educational policies. The reauthorization of the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 marked the beginning of the current drive to engage families. The primary educational policy, known then as Education and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), required parent advisory councils in Head Start programs (Cutler, 2000). In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was authorized to assure equitable and accessible education. This, too, included parent involvement, spelling out parental rights in many areas including, consent, notification, participation and decision-making.

Formal U.S. education policy, now called Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), still requires family involvement in education, although specifics have changed over time. In 2013, the Education Department adopted the Dual Capacity Building Framework, discussed later in this paper, as federal policies’ main pathway to family engagement.

**Family Engagement**

As described above, researchers began systematically investigating aspects of the family-school relationship, and by the 1980s, research demonstrated that parent involvement in
schooling was related to student success (Epstein, 2009; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). These early studies became the foundations of family engagement. They asked and answered basic questions about teachers’ beliefs about the role of parents in schooling, whether families wanted to be involved, and possible benefits of involving families. Results from these studies formed the basic tenets in the field of family engagement.

**Teacher Beliefs**

In *Teachers’ Reported Practices of Parent Involvement: Problems and Possibilities*, Epstein and Becker (1982) explored teacher perceptions of parent involvement in schools. The authors organized teacher comments into three categories:

1. Parents care but cannot actually help the school or their children
2. Parents care and should not help with school learning
3. Parents care and their involvement, with guidance, can provide important support for students (p. 125)

Epstein (1986) confirmed these ideas in a later study, which indicated that teachers fell into one of two categories: teachers who believed that parents can and should help their students or teachers who felt that parents should focus on parenting and leave school matters to educators.

However, more recent studies suggest that when parents in communities with high socioeconomic status are given more power in schools (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008) or have more power due to differences in social class or educational levels (Lareau & Muñoz, 2012), teacher authority diminishes (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, p. 395) as parents “scrutinize…work and encroach on…professional domains” (Lareau & Muñoz, p. 203). This insecurity causes teachers to set up boundaries around the relationship (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv) and prompts feelings of helplessness and exposure (Lareau & Muñoz, 2012).
Likewise, Ishimaru, Lott, Torres, Fajardo, Tran and Williams (2014) note that while most studies in their review encouraged “parent leadership,” this potential remained unrecognized. Instead of “real” parent representation (p. 43), schools relied on parents already deeply involved, even employed by the school, to typify all parents. “Unaffiliated parents,” as the authors call them, were unpursued and invisible. This “ambivalence” towards “real families” (p. 43) highlights a schism between the stated goals of family engagement and actual implementation.

Parent Beliefs

John Hopkins researcher Joyce Epstein (1986) is a well-known name in family engagement research. She is a pioneer in this field and directs the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools. She surveyed parents to ascertain whether or not they wanted to be involved at school and found the answer to be an overwhelming “yes.” Most families want to be involved in their students’ schooling. She documented that: 1) parents want to be involved; 2) parents want more information from schools; 3) parent engagement has wide benefits; and 4) parent engagement improves relationships between schools and families. Moreover, parents are responsive to engagement efforts and student academics flourish in response (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 1986). Schools had assumed that parents were minimally interested in schooling, thus, early research into the family-school relationship exposed a fault line. Parents do want to be involved and parent involvement has substantial benefit.

Irwin (2011) echoes these sentiments. The author found that all parents, across socio-economic levels, care deeply about their children’s future. “Parents revealed quite profound moral perspectives on parenting” (p. 485). Contrary to expectation, these views are complex, nuanced and evolve as children grow and change.
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Not only do parents want to be involved, they also want schools to provide more and better information (Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Johnston et al., 2013). In particular, parents would like to know how to work with and support their students at home (Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). In a survey by the non-profit organization, Public Agenda, Johnston (2013) found that some parents were frustrated by the lack of guidance provided by the school. Although parents want information from schools, they desire the “right amounts” and “right types” of information (pp. 37-38).

School atmosphere is also central to parental perceptions of involvement. The approach taken by a school or by an individual teacher has significant influence on how parents perceive their own engagement. A positive and welcoming school climate is more likely to engage parents (Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mapp, 2003). Likewise, an invitation from the school, a teacher, or the student will also engage families (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Finally, offering a wide variety of ways to interact with the school is also more likely to engage parents. Families vary widely and families need a variety of approaches to engagement in order achieve successful engagement (Hill & Taylor, 2004). While research indicates that parents are generally confident in their schools (Epstein, 1986; Johnston et al., 2013), research shows a link between the act of engaging and the development of a positive school view among family members (Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Dauber, 1991)

Lastly, parents’ attitudes about school are influenced by their own experiences and contexts (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mapp, 2003). Hoover-Dempsey identifies an array of parents’ attitudes contributing to engagement. She notes that parents’ beliefs in their ability to act, and parents’ previous experiences with and attitudes about schooling, significantly affect whether they become involved. Mapp (2003) concurs, concluding
that schools must examine their own roles in promoting or reducing engagement by considering the experiences of parents. These factors determine whether family engagement programs and policies will have positive benefits for students, families, schools, and communities.

**Benefits**

In general, research demonstrates that family engagement influences a wide variety of outcomes: test scores, homework completion, taking harder classes, graduation rates, attitudes towards learning, homework, school, and increased college attendance (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 2011; Henderson, 2007; Van Voorhis, 2011). Generally, these findings split into academic, socio-emotional and relational benefits. However, families differ greatly and who is being engaged changes how, and if, they benefit. These complicating factors will be explored later in this chapter.

For example, Epstein (1991) compared longitudinal data on reading achievement of nearly 300 3rd and 5th graders in Baltimore with the parent involvement practices of their teachers. She found that strong parent involvement practices correlated with greater gains in reading. Generally, researchers have found a relationship between school activities done at home and academic gains for children living in urban settings (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999). Moreover, family involvement can improve student socio-emotional, outcomes, including pro-social behavior (Martin, 2007), becoming enthusiastic about school and learning, and decreases behavior problems (Henderson et al., 2002). Family engagement is also associated with positive relationships. Underwood’s (2012) survey of Canadian parents reported that relationships with providers were most important to their engagement. Likewise, Forry (2011) found that parents respond well when
they are “warmly supported” (p. 8) by “flexible and responsive” staff (p. 6). These positive outcomes have resulted in frameworks for implementation of family engagement in schools.

**Conceptual Frameworks of Family Engagement**

Early research into the family-school relationship uncovered a parental desire to be involved, which results in benefits for students. This discovery marked what Minnich (2004) would call a “fault line” (p. 49). This “fault line” marked a misunderstanding, an area in which educators and families hoped for mutual understanding but did not have it. These studies shifted the educators’ perspectives, caused a partial paradigm shift in the ways schools interacted with parents, and resulted in new conceptualizations of how the family-school relationship could work.

Historically, educators saw parent involvement as one-dimensional and separate from schools (Hill & Taylor, 2004, p. 161). This type of involvement could be described as a continuum with no involvement on one end and acceptable involvement on the other, focusing primarily on the relationship between the family and the school and centered on what parents could do for the school (Figure 2.1). As researchers unearthed value in a positive home-school relationship, conceptual frameworks emerged to provide pathways to engaging families.

**Figure 2.1**

*Parent Involvement Continuum – Traditional Model*
**Activity-based engagement.** In *Schools and Families: Issues and Actions*, educator and author Dorothy Rich (1987) argued that each party in the family, school, and community relationship must take responsibility for the education of children. She suggested specific actions for each stakeholder. Families should be “assign[ed] educational responsibilities,” provided with “practical information they need to help educate their children,” and be encouraged to include fathers (pp. 26-28). In Rich’s view, schools have the responsibility to fund and promote family involvement, train teachers to work with families, and allow communities to use their facilities. Lastly, community involvement includes “provid[ing] meaningful roles for the private sector,” and “involv[ing] senior citizens” (pp. 32-33).

Another example emerges from a literature review by Greenwood and Hutchins (1991). While primarily focused on a lack of parent engagement coursework within teacher education programs, the authors outlined five elementary involvement roles with which to address family engagement in higher education:

- Parent as Audience
- Parent as Volunteer or Paraprofessional
- Parent as Teacher of Own Child
- Parent as Learner
- Parent as Decision Maker

The author’s suggestions include the teaching of specific “techniques” of involvement, using the above framework as a guide. Each suggestion contains an activity in which families may participate, such as the activity titled “‘Yes I Can, No You Can’t’ Holding a Family Debate,” designed to teach children how to argue a perspective different from their own (p. 47).
As mentioned previously, Epstein (2009; 2011) departs from the Rich (1987) and Greenwood (1991) models by positing this relationship as dynamic and interactive rather than static. She visualizes the home-school-community relationship as three interactive spheres called the “Overlapping Spheres of Influence” (Figure 2.2). The spheres of school, family and community center on the child and interrelate in different ways at different time during a child’s school career (Epstein, 2011). Moreover, each sphere is equally critical to the academic success of a child; families have an equal role in this three-way relationship. Viewing the school, families and community relationship three-dimensionally, rather than linearly and dynamically, rather than statically, represents an important shift in perspective.

**Figure 2.2**

*Epstein’s (2011) Overlapping Spheres of Influence*

Additionally, Epstein (2011), like Greenwood above, breaks parent engagement into specific roles. She identifies, “parenting,” “communicating,” “volunteering,” “learning at home,” “decision making,” and “collaborating with the community” as the six types of parent involvement. Interactive homework, part of the *Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork* (TIPS) program at Johns Hopkins University, is one example of Epstein’s activity-based approach to
engagement. It focuses on giving parents school activities to do at home. TIPS provides families with interactive assignments that tightly relate to standards, and subsequent studies showed that participating students enjoyed homework more and received higher test scores (Van Voorhis, 2011).

**Relational engagement.** James Comer (1991) was another early proponent of working with families. He concluded that parent involvement was a critical element of successful learning, noting that “best results are achieved only when these two institutions work together” (p. 276). However, in Comer’s mind, parents supporting schools through activities was only part of a larger goal. He believed in and advocated for the “meaningful involvement of parents” (p. 271). For involvement to be successful, Comer argued that parent involvement strategies must be embedded within an overall school “improvement process designed to create positive relationships” (p. 271). Moreover, he stated that parent involvement programs sometimes fail because they are “often not grounded in child development, relationships, and systems theory” (Comer & Ben-Avie, 2010; Comer & Haynes, 1991, p. 272).

Comer’s School Development Program consists of three pillars:

1. A School Planning and Management Team that is inclusive of all stakeholders, including families, teachers, administrators, staff, janitors, and more. This team oversees functioning of the school
2. A Mental Health Team designed to identify and address developmental and mental health issues
3. A Parent Program that positions parents to support school programming (pp. 272-3).

Comer’s pillars prioritize relational aspects of education, arguing that schools which build positive relationships with students and families will provide better preparation for life.
Subsequent research supports Comer’s contention that relationships play a critical role in engaging families (Francis et al., 2016; Geller, 2016; Underwood, 2012), with one study noting that “the importance of these relationships cannot be stressed enough” (Underwood, 2012, p. 393). Bryk et al (2002), deepen this idea in *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. Bryk’s research took place after the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988, which decentralized control of schools. The authors used longitudinal surveys, achievement data, and interviews to explore which schools thrived under the new structural model. They found that schools with high levels of what Bryk calls “relational trust,” defined as the integration of “respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity” (p. 23), succeeded. Because school is an “intrinsically social enterprise” and ignoring the quality of relationships will result in failure of reforms (p. 19).

Soo Hong (2011), Wellesley College professor of education and author of *A Cord of Three Strands: A New Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools*, also provides an interpersonal model of family engagement. She outlines a “relational approach to family engagement” (p. 190) driven by the philosophy that:

- Parent engagement is not a fixed set of activities but a dynamic, evolving, and context-specific process that requires us to break with tradition and consider multiple perspectives, varied experiences and the myriad dimensions of culture and power (p.188).

She voices concern that traditional family engagement strategies focus on individual families doing school-suggested activities rather than on building interpersonal connections. Building connections, Hong asserts, leads to “mutually beneficial relationship between families and school” (p. 86), and more importantly, strong relationships that spark change.
Ishimaru et al (2014) explored three family engagement programs for commonalities by considering which programmatic features lead to equitable parent-school collaboration with “non-dominant parents” (pp. 8-10). Their conceptual framework (Figure 2.3) centers on equity, realized through relationships. The authors draw distinctions between the traditional, activity-based methods of engaging families put forth by Rich (1987), Greenwood (1991) and Epstein (2009; 2011) and relational approaches outlined by Comer (1991), Bryk (2002), and Hong (2011).

**Figure 2.3**

*Traditional Partnerships Compared with Equitable Partnerships (Ishimaru et al, 2014)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRADITIONAL PARTNERSHIPS</th>
<th>EQUITABLE COLLABORATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>GOALS:</strong> Material resources and discrete aims within a culture of denial or implicit blame</td>
<td><strong>GOALS:</strong> Systemic change within a culture of shared responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRATEGIES:</strong> Reliance on technical change such as scaling existing practices or leveraging existing relationships</td>
<td><strong>STRATEGIES:</strong> Adaptive change to build capacity and relationships of a broad range of stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARENT ROLE:</strong> Non-dominant parents are seen as clients and beneficiaries, professionals set the agenda</td>
<td><strong>PARENT ROLE:</strong> Non-dominant parents are seen as educational leaders who contribute and help shape the agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROCESS:</strong> Apolitical approach focused on schools in isolation from broader issues in the community</td>
<td><strong>PROCESS:</strong> Reform as a political process that addresses broader issues in community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo and Wood (2008), of the Southwest Educational Development Lab, reviewed studies published between 2005-2008 and provides an overview of this research. The authors identify three characteristics and actions underlying effective engagement programs from that timeframe. Their description of traditional partnerships portrays activity-based engagement. For example, in traditional approaches, goals are explicit and focus on specific learning outcomes, like the TIPS program. Like Comer (1991), Bryk (2002), and Hong (2011), the
authors assert that relationships are critically important to engaging families. The inclusion of recognition and involvement combines three elements into the primary drivers of effective family engagement (Figure 2.4). *Relationships* among all parties in school-family-community relationship must nurture mutual trust and the ability to work together. *Recognition* acknowledges that families differ in “needs, class, and culture,” and *inclusion* of everyone builds strong partnerships and a shared obligation of student well-being.

**Figure 2.4**

*SEDL Framework for Effective Family and Community Connections with Schools*

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**Community engagement.** Early approaches, such as those put forth by Rich (1987) and Epstein (2009), focused on using school activities to engage parents. This method prioritizes the school’s agenda. More recent approaches emphasize importance of relationships, without which family engagement initiatives are unlikely to succeed. This perspective is open to families bringing their ideas and values as equal partners in students’ development. Further research
looks even more broadly, highlighting the importance of communities in successful family engagement programs (Auerbach, 2009; Ishimaru et al., 2014; Schutz, 2006; Warren, 2005; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011).

For example, a literature review by Johnson (2012) looks at how family engagement research frames the interplay between school and community. Most studies conceive of the school-neighborhood relationship as a “faucet” (p. 490), which assumes that neighborhood influences are static and do not impact schools. Furthermore, school influences turn on and off, like a faucet, depending on whether school is in session. Johnson discounts this model as overly simplistic. Instead, he asserts that schools and neighborhoods do not stand in isolation and the interaction between school and community is dynamic and variable. He acknowledges that while schools are important, “neighborhood conditions” have greater impact (p. 492). However, the precise mechanisms are complex and require further research.

Schutz (2006), reviews “the most influential and/or promising approaches” to engage families in “inner-city communities” (p. 691). He notes that programs centered on and in schools have been broadly ineffective, while programs incorporating the broader community continue to have potential. Warren (2005), echoes Johnson’s (2012) idea that neighborhood context is at best seen as static and at worst, ignored. In his case study of three community-based organizations (CBO) in low-income urban neighborhoods, the author examines the benefit of a “community-based relational approaches to fostering parental engagement in schools” (p. 2209). For Warren, “parent engagement becomes a shared responsibility,” (p. 2239) with a reintegration of school and community in which CBOs and families care broadly for all children in their neighborhood, not just their own.
Again, like Ishimaru et al. (2014), the authors prioritize a relational approach in which equity is a primary concern. This comparison of traditional versus community-based engagement models requires strong relationships as a foundation, moving beyond an activity-based approach and parents setting the agenda.

Community-based family engagement works toward equity among all stakeholders because equity is believed to be key to both engaging families and reforming schools. An equitable approach recognizes the impact of community on a child’s learning and the importance of community in a child’s life (Warren et al., 2009). At the core of these community-inclusive approaches are the ideas that schools must spend time building and strengthening relationships with all key stakeholders. Relationships with the greater community are critical to engaging families because these relationships build the “understand that communities bring different needs, aspirations, and desires to their children’s education” (Warren, 2005, p. 2210).

Furthermore, Warren et al. (2009) ask, “what sense does it make to try to reform urban schools while communities around them stagnate or collapse?” (p. 133). They conclude that you can’t make schools work without facing challenges in neighborhoods. In this section I’ve presented family engagement models from the simple, parent activity approach to ones that are increasingly nuanced and inclusive. From Rich’s (1987) plan to give parents “education...
activities” to Hong’s (2011) “relational engagement” to Warren’s (2005) advocacy for community inclusion, family engagement has evolved and shifted.

**Shifting Ideas, Shifting Terminology, Shifting Models**

The first half of this chapter examined some historical highlights in the school-family relationship, and the second describes the remarkable evolution of these ideas from the 1980s until the present. Accordingly, terminology evolved over time to reflect changing philosophies and increasing breadth and depth of the relationship between schools and families. “Families” replaced “parents” in order to embrace all family members involved in a child’s education, and “involvement” became “engagement” to capture the hoped-for vibrant interaction of communication and cooperation between school and family. Thus, “parent involvement” became “parent engagement.” “Parent engagement,” in turn, became “family engagement,” as parents moved from inconsequential to integral in the eyes of educators.

This move from involvement to engagement is nuanced but critical. Larry Ferlazzo (2011), a teacher and family engagement expert, distinguished “parent involvement” as a moment when staff and administrators “leads with their mouths,” and “family engagement” as when they “lead with their ears” (p. 10). Ferlazzo’s definition captures important differences between “listening” and “talking,” and between “instructing” and “collaborating.” His definitions, however, do not fully capture the essential equality between school and family. These definitions still position schools at the center of the relationship. To achieve engagement, both families and educators must speak and listen, and share in both decision-making and action.

Family engagement frameworks changed as well. Epstein’s (2011) spheres of engagement suggested a more robust, less rigid relationship than the previous one-dimensional model. Hong (2011), Ferguson (2008), and Bryk (2002) highlighted the importance of relationships and true
partnership in these programs while Warren et al (2005), note the fundamental importance of community. The developments highlighted in this section lead to a final conceptual framework - *The Dual Capacity-Building Framework* (DCBF).

Karen Mapp and Paul Kuttner (2013), both professors of education at Harvard University, offer another model of family engagement, one that combines the more traditional approach with some aspects of relational and community engagement. According to the authors, the DCBF serves as “a compass” for school, rather than as prescription for action (p. 6). This approach “chart[s] a path toward effective engagement efforts that are linked to achievement and school improvement” (p. 6). According to the authors, “both educators and families must have the skills, knowledge, confidence, and belief systems before being able to participate in family engagement efforts which will be successful” (p. 5).

The DCBF (Figure 2.6) requires “opportunity conditions” that come in two forms: “process conditions” and “organizational conditions,” both which must be relevant to the context of the school and community (p. 8). Process conditions are: 1) direct links to learning; 2) building home-school relationships; and 3) building the aptitude of all involved, including families, teachers, and administrators. Organizational conditions also must meet three criteria: 1) focused and methodical; 2) merged into district and school programming; and 3) maintained over time. The purpose of this approach is to build “the 4 Cs, capabilities, communications, confidence, and cognition” among all involved from teachers and parents to administrators and staff (Higgins, quoted in Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, pp. 10-11).
This framework was adopted at the federal level in 2013 and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is currently running focus group tests among practitioners and parents. The final product, a framework for family engagement spanning birth through college, will become state educational policy. The DCBF incorporates each of the three models - activity-based, relational, and community-based. It is designed to be flexible and simply provides guidelines for districts. Within these guidelines, districts can, in theory, tailor engagement to meet the needs of their families. For example, the United States has moved from hiring a school master to ensure religious literacy in 1647, to parents following the school’s
agenda in the 1950s, to broad partnerships between all stakeholders from parents, to schools, to community. Each constituency holds equal responsibility for the education of children. Families and schools have communicated about education since the earliest days of the American Colonies. The past three decades produced research into these relationships, focusing on family engagement with schools through activities, relationship building, and community-based efforts. However, there are many social factors that influence the context within which a family exists. This context is a crucial component shaping the family-school relationship.

**Complexity Within Engagement**

There are many factors that complicate and raise questions about the fundamental assumptions underlying family engagement. For example, Baker (1998) states that while family engagement appears to have positive effects, the process is nuanced due to the “complex ways that interact with family background and social context variables” (p. 3). Baker also sets the stage for the examination of yet another set of fault lines. While family engagement research was kindled by the realization that families did want to be involved in their children’s schooling, the conceptual frameworks described previously reflect internal biases and hidden assumptions. The next section explores three of these biases.

**The Difficulty with Definitions**

Although terminology evolved to reflect an outcome of productive and respectful communication and collaboration, family engagement programs do not embody these ideas. Regrettably, family engagement has a problem with definitions. First is a simple issue, what exactly is family engagement? As we’ve seen, engagement can be defined in many ways. This literature review has presented research that finds that home-based school activities are the mechanism for improved schooling (Epstein, 2009; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Rich, 1987).
Other research claims that relationships are primarily important (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Ferguson et al., 2008; Hong, 2011; Ishimaru et al., 2014). Still others see the involvement of the community as the principal path to school improvement (Johnson, 2012; Schutz, 2006; Warren, 2005).

Disagreement regarding definitions can lead to unintended consequences. Traditional, activity-based programs can be “school-centric,” embodying school priorities and ignoring family priorities (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013, p. 149). Cooper (2009) echoes this idea, stating that some family engagement programs expect what she calls, “deferential parental involvement” (p.380) which only accepts a narrow range of acceptable behaviors.

The tension among different definitions of family engagement generate questions. As described previously, family engagement is beneficial. However, which factors engender benefits? Do relationships make activities better, more nuanced, more useful? Or do activities build relationships? Might effective programs vary from community to community? Researchers call for common, or at least clarified, definitions to which we can align research (Baker et al., 1998; Barton et al., 2004; Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004). The number of different definitions makes it challenging to compare results and draw conclusions (Baker et al., 1998; Izzo et al., 1999). Family engagement needs a common lexicon, but more importantly, family engagement needs to explore and understand the boundaries and nuances of these definitions in order to be able to address differences among families.

Likewise, specific terms important to family engagement are also poorly defined. Defining community is complicated because its meaning shifts across disciplines and researchers define it in a variety of ways. For example, Keys (2015) looked at family engagement programs across urban and rural communities revealing that “quality family engagement is interwoven with
environmental factors” (p. 74-75). Vaden-Kieran’s (2010) study of neighborhood impact on Head Start concurs. They list caregiver education, household size, home language, child gender and ethnicity among important community influences, which have substantial impact on children. Li (2017) examines community influence by size and quality of parental networks and concludes that better networks result in more engagement. Even the governance structure of a school may have impact on engagement (Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009). These differences in definition make it challenging to draw broader conclusions.

All Families are Not the Same

Another key term is “family.” Parent and family, are often used interchangeably. Family engagement research often treats families as homogenous with an expectation that all families will respond in similar ways (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). Hanafin and Lynch (2002) divide this expected behavior into two subsets: “cultural deficit model,” in which families must be taught to do things “correctly” (p. 35), and the Parent Teacher Council model (PTC) – a middle-class model for those who are already succeeding. These labels are biased and problematic.

Similarly, educators also generally see parents as passive (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Warren & Mapp, 2011). For example, parents are expected to be universally cordial with school employees (Cooper, 2009; Lareau & Erin, 1999; Lareau & Muñoz, 2012). The expectation of passive, polite responses makes it challenging for families with significant concerns about their student’s education to present their areas of disagreement to school staff and have their concerns be recognized. Instead, their input is sometimes seen as complaining.

As the authors above indicate, families are not uniform and family engagement programming should reflect this. There are many ways in which families vary: religion, family
structure, home language, immigration status, special education students, and more. Hong (2011) asserts that school administrators cannot simply ignore poverty, race, class, language, and other key features of different school communities. Family engagement, she says, must “confront them head on” (p. 196). The sections that follow address three areas of difference among families: race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender.

**Race and ethnicity.** Race and ethnicity are important factors in family engagement. The negative impact racial issues have in society and schooling is well documented (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Rothstein, 2004; Shapiro, 2004). For example, teacher beliefs about the racial and ethnic backgrounds of their families determines how and if they become involved and non-dominant parents tend to be seen negatively (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013, p. 150). Torres and Hurtado-Vivas (2011) outline the ways that parent engagement can reflect the dominant culture and exclude traditions from non-dominant communities. For example, they describe how traditional forms of Latinx literacy, such as “religious books, community newspapers, magazines, storytelling, [and] folk tales…” are ignored in favor of the school’s preferred forms of literacy activities (p. 232). The authors argue that not only do schools miss an opportunity to engage in culturally relevant literacy learning, they also send a message that the school literacy activities are more valuable than those in a child’s home. They state that “the fact that some parents are not able to speak English does not mean they are not engaged in several types of literacies” (p. 241). Parents, the authors indicate, wish to be engaged in a culturally relevant manner, utilizing traditional and common Latinx literacy practices.

Additionally, sometimes non-dominant families are actively engaged in their child’s education but use methods that go unrecognized by the school. Auerbach’s (2007) qualitative study of low-income, non-white families navigating the college application process found a
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variety of ways in which families supported this process. None were seen as engagement by the school. Doucet (2011) identifies a similar example. She found that Haitian families want a high-quality education for their children, but do not want home and school to overlap. Parents are concerned their children will lose their connection to Haitian culture while also developing negative behaviors from exposure to American children.

Lastly, and perhaps most problematic, Hill’s (2004) and Robinson and Harris’s (2014) research indicates that while family involvement in middle and high school are important, benefits do not distribute equally across multiple categories including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and parent educational level.

**Socioeconomic Status.** Socioeconomic status influences family engagement (Cheadle & Amato, 2011; Dumais et al., 2012; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Robinson & Harris, 2014). First, many of the strategies promoted to engage families ignore potential obstacles created by class differences (Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Next, middle-class and lower-class families relate to schools in different ways. Additionally, research suggests that both parent educational level and socioeconomic background influence a teacher’s perceptions of students (Dumais et al., 2012). Likewise, researchers uncovered a relationship between educational level, job flexibility, and ease of engaging with schools. Members of the middle-class are more likely to have higher levels of education and sometimes have jobs with greater flexibility. Those with jobs that are more flexible are able to be physically present at the school for conferences and events. The middle-class parent therefore, may have an easier time engaging with the schools (Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau & Shumar, 1996). However, the ideas presented in this section are trends that apply to many, but not all families within a specific socioeconomic background.
Class traits are not monolithic and all-encompassing because parenting behavior varies greatly even within socioeconomic status (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Li & Fischer, 2017).

The idea of concerted cultivation, first suggested by Lareau (2011), provides a useful lens for considering how social class can promote or hinder education (Cheadle & Amato, 2011; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau & Shumar, 1996). “Concerted cultivation” is “…the idea that educational and financial resources” of the middle- and upper-classes lead to different styles of parenting (Dumais et al., 2012). The middle-and upper-classes use their knowledge, money, and connections to create tailored educational experiences for their children.

Furthermore, teachers, who are primarily middle class, bring “a rhetoric of individual achievement” into inner city classrooms, thereby prioritizing values and ideals which are not necessarily a good match for students and families (Schutz, 2006, p. 701). Kainz (2007) concurs, noting that family engagement frameworks are a reflection of middle-class value and priorities.

Finally, as reported in the section on race and ethnicity, benefits of family engagement vary according to socioeconomic background (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Li & Fischer, 2017). Li’s (2015) review dives into family engagement data, analyzing the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class (ECLS-K), from 2000-2007 and confirms Hill’s findings. The authors conclude that more family engagement does not always result better outcomes. In fact, family engagement has a tipping point after which it has negative outcomes. This tipping point appears to vary by socioeconomic background with families with incomes above the average for their area more likely to tip into negative engagement. Lareau (1989) titles this “the dark side of parent involvement” (p. 149).

To what extent do family engagement strategies reflect dominant parenting practices? (Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Lareau and Shumar (1996) argue that dominant ideas about the
family-school relationship prevail in schools. They comment that “…there is little reason to believe that working-class and lower-class parents will, as a result of a policy intervention, begin to emulate the school-related behavior of middle-class parents” (p. 25). Once again, parenting traits may trend among parents of similar socioeconomic backgrounds, but variations within groups and similarities among groups are still common. It is important to read family engagement literature with both perspectives in mind. Family engagement policies and practices may favor one approach to parenting and parents within a socioeconomic group will have similarities and differences in their parenting strategies.

**Parent Gender.** Family engagement research defines critical terms too generally. This ignores important variations among families, including race and ethnicity and socio-economic status. Gender is another important but largely invisible aspect of family engagement. A casual observer might note that mothers are more frequently involved in schools. This gives rise to an important question; who in the family does the work of family engagement?

Sociological studies of families indicate that mothers are primarily accountable for the daily lives of their children (Coltrane, 1996; Walzer, 1996). In fact, this seems so obvious as to be assumed. However, because the role of gender differences is overlooked in the family-school relationship, it warrants scrutiny.

Family engagement research states that participation of the entire family (e.g., parents, siblings, extended family members) increases a student’s academic success (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 2011; Henderson, 2007; Henderson et al., 2002; Mapp, 2003). However, research into family life reveals that mothers in the United States hold significantly more responsibility for the day-to-day lives of their children than do other family members, including fathers.
Adults in the United States tend to adopt gender-specific responsibilities (Coltrane, 1996, p. 27). The establishment of these gender roles in the United States can be traced through specific historical developments beginning with an economic shift in the 1800s. As men began to earn money by working outside the home, they became less involved in the daily routines of running the house. Correspondingly, women were left to manage household tasks and childcare. Overtime, these roles grew deep roots and became entrenched. The resulting ideology exalts motherhood and homemaking, giving women a “symbolic role” in the family (Hochschild, 1997, p. 233) and “sentimentalizing” the role of mother (Coontz, 1992, p. 43).

Even now, these gender-specific ideas often organize family life. Women not only administer the logistical and concrete aspects of family life and housework, but also typically carry the mental work of family life. This includes not only parenting and household management, but also relational tasks (Hochschild, 1997), and the “thinking, feeling and interpersonal work,” “worrying,” “processing of information,” and managing the division of labor between spouses (Walzer, 1996, pp. 219-226).

The labor of women often goes unnoticed. Lareau (2000) notes that fathers reported substantial involvement, but they “had far less knowledge about their children’s daily lives than their wives did” (p. 412). This mismatch between perception and reality persists across race and class, with only single fathers accurately reporting their involvement.

Overall, women assume the mental labor of family life and “recruit, direct, and motivate” fathers to complete tasks and, as such, fathers function as assistants rather than as partners (Lareau, 2000, p. 416-417). Wives manage, while fathers “help,” often with nudging and explicit instructions from their wives (Coltrane, 1996, p. 74). Therefore, if women hold primary responsibility for children, household matters, and relationships, and fathers play a secondary
role at most, then *family* engagement functionally means *mother* engagement. Cole (2007) notes this problem with definitions, stating that “the word parent is simple but misleading, it obscures gender roles in families and therefore also in the home-school relationship” (p. 16). Also as noted in Chapter One, parenting research overwhelmingly focuses on heterosexual couples and therefore, these ideas may not apply to other family configurations.

This assumption exists, in part, because there is little data looking at “family level processes” and family engagement (Berryhill, 2017, p. 261). This research indicates that school involvement and parent relationships are intertwined with traditional gender norms and women hold responsibility for the relationship with the school. Reay (2005) concurs, noting that because school is in the realm of the mother, family engagement is powerfully gendered.

Race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and parent gender are three contextual factors which influence the family-school relationship. However, these factors do not operate independently. The complexity of the family-school relationship is found in the inseparability of these, and other, contextual elements of families’ lives.

**Power and Relationships**

A single thread unites each problem with definitions discussed in this literature review. Overly broad definitions obscure unequal power relationships in family engagement policies and programming. A nuanced examination of race and ethnicity, socio-economic status and gender definitions uncover unequal power dynamics.

Fine (1993) was an early divergent voice, pointing out that family engagement is not a “power-neutral” partnership” (p. 682). She argues that substantial “questions of *power, authority*, and *control* must be addressed head-on” (p. 683). Likewise, Delpit (1995) says that “to act as if power does not exist is to ensure that the power status quo remains the same” (p. 39) and
power differences may explain why some family engagement programs do not succeed (Todd & Higgins, 1998). Also, ironically, reforms that include family engagement have shifted relationships, changing long standing dynamics (Fusarelli & Bass, 2015).

Consequently, the idea of family engagement “partnerships” becomes problematic. Warren (2011) observes “strikingly unequal power and resources” between families and educators, and because of this, Cole (2007) argues that parents can never truly be partners. Deslandes (2015) sees power in the hands of educators who, in many instances, have higher education, knowledge and the confidence of the system. At best, family-school partnerships are poorly defined, and at worst, they reflect an imbalance of power.

For example, Doucet’s (2011) aforementioned study of Haitian immigrant families found that parents preferred to keep the spheres of home and school separate. This complicates the basic tenet of family engagement, that all families want to be involved in their child’s learning. As Doucet discovered, parents may prioritize a different type of involvement. This raises a critical question; in this case, who has the power to define engagement? How do power differentials influence the family-school relationship when families and schools hold opposing expectations and conflicting educational goals?

Similarly, Torres and Hurtado-Vivas (2011) reveal how a school’s definition of family literacy uncovers an unequal power dynamic. The authors describe a family engagement literacy program which ignores existing literacy practices with the Latinx community because school staff does not recognize these activities as legitimate. They also assert that these decisions reflect an imbalance between families and school staff in which families acquiesce to the school’s definition of literacy. In this situation, who holds the power to define literacy? How
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might culturally relevant family engagement programs result in a broader view? What impact might this have on students from non-dominant communities?

These examples illustrate how power dynamics are a fundamental part of the family-school relationship. However, the structure of power dynamics differs from one community to another. In some locations, school staff are not the dominant group, instead, parents with high incomes, high levels of education, substantial financial resources, and high-status jobs, are more powerful. These parents can use their resources (e.g. time, connections, money) to communicate their educational goals to the school and supplement their child’s education through other means (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008; Deslandes et al., 2015).

Summary

The goals of families and schools are simultaneously interwoven and at odds. This contradiction is rooted in the history of public schooling in the United States from the 1640s to the present. The past four decades represent a period of close examination of this relationship, yielding research that demonstrates a link between home involvement and student achievement. As researchers uncovered this relationship, they developed frameworks to guide the work of educators. Over time, these evolved to incorporate new findings, moving from using school-like activities to prioritizing relationships among stakeholders, and finally to viewing the broader community as critical to success.

The model of robust family engagement based on the shared responsibility of families, schools, and the community developed from uncovering of “fault lines” in education. Classic studies in family engagement revealed that parents want to be involved in schools and their involvement is beneficial. However, as educators and politicians search for ways to integrate family engagement into schools, important distinctions are vanishing. Family engagement
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policies and programming must honor differences among families to prevent new “fault lines” from forming and consequently marginalizing some families (Minnich, 2004). The relationships between race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, power and family engagement strategies requires deeper consideration. Examining these areas have the potential to reframe our perspectives of the family-school relationship in unexpected ways and prevent education from becoming the repository for the culture of the dominant group. Otherwise, policy based on research devoid of these considerations will represent the voices of some, but not all parents. While meeting the needs of all families, all the time is likely impossible, encompassing the perspectives of as many parents as possible will strengthen family engagement programs.

Two areas stand out as especially important to the consideration of the family-school relationship, but their breadth seems relatively unconsidered: socioeconomic status of all families and parenting. Given that family engagement requires families to meet specific expectations and families vary greatly by race, ethnicity, family structure, parenting styles, educational expectations and more, it seems critical to investigate the underlying assumptions of family engagement practices from the perspectives of families. Doing so has the potential to reveal how parents of different socioeconomic backgrounds perceive their relationship to the schools, examine areas of convergence and divergence, and explore what impact (if any) socioeconomic status has on the family-school relationship.

To unearth hidden assumptions about the roles of socioeconomic status and parenting in the family-school relationship, I propose to adopt Standpoint Theory (Harding, 2005) as a lens for this research project. Doing so may allow this researcher to identify and ask, “common sense questions in reverse” (Nader, 1972, p. 5) in order to provoke new perspectives. Chapter Three
articulates the design of this study, including the rationale, data collection, instrumentation, and the data analysis process.
Chapter Three

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter Three is to describe the research methodology for this *Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods* study regarding the experiences of parents from various socioeconomic backgrounds with the family-school relationship. This study focuses on families from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds with children attending public schools in communities with incomes above the state’s median income. This chapter begins with the reiteration of the study’s purpose, context, and research questions. The rationale for using both quantitative and qualitative approaches for this study are discussed in-depth. This chapter then details the role of the researcher and provides an overview of the selection of study participants. Next, Chapter Three outlines the plan for data collection, explains instrumentation, and describes data analysis. Finally, this chapter concludes with the limitations and delimitations of this study and a summary of Chapter Three.

Purpose & Context

As described in Chapter One, the relationship between families and schools has shifted and evolved since 1647, the year in which the first public school in the United States was founded. By the 1980s, researchers were systematically exploring this relationship and demonstrated that parent involvement in schooling was related to student success and that most families want to be involved in their student’s schooling (Epstein, 2009; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

However, as discussed in Chapter Two, context in family engagement matters. While family engagement appears to have positive effects, the process is nuanced due to the “complex ways that interact with family background and social context variables” (Becker & Epstein, 1991).
Families are not identical, and context determines how families will connect with schools (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). In fact, families relate differently to schools in a number of ways. Race and ethnicity influence this relationship (Auerbach, 2007; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Doucet, 2011; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Ishimaru et al., 2014). Likewise, because mothers are more likely to be the adult overseeing the family-school relationship, gender also affects this interaction (Berryhill, 2017; Cole, 2007; Coltrane, 1996; Coontz, 1992; Hochschild, 1997; Lareau, 2000; Reay, 2005; Walzer, 1996). Lastly, socioeconomic status affects how families and schools connect, with research indicating that parents with incomes higher than average are more likely to approach education in a manner which aligns with the expectations of the school, leading to stronger connections (Cheadle & Amato, 2011; Dumais et al., 2012; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Robinson & Harris, 2014).

As outlined previously, research often “studies down” (Nader, 1972). That is, research focuses on traits that mark parents as different from what is typical or expected in schools. For example, “studying down” might focus on families who do not speak English as a first language, those who have lower incomes, or who are not of the dominant racial or ethnic group. However, these studies contain an inherent assumption: these barriers are preventing families from engaging the “right” way, that is, the way families in high-achieving districts relate to schools.

In this research project, I proposed to “study up, down and sideways.” “Studying down” looked at how families with lower incomes perceive their relationship with the child’s school. “Studying up” and “sideways” expanded the lens to include families with average and above average incomes. Using socioeconomic status as a focus when “studying up, down and sideways” allowed the researcher to observe similarities and differences among participants’ perceptions of their children’s schools. In addition, parental perceptions are not confined to the
immediate family. Nor are these perceptions static. Instead, “studying up” may not only reveal
similarities and differences among families but also illustrate ways in which differing
perceptions of the family-school relationship are mutually influential. This study may uncover
areas of dynamic interaction among differing views of schools. The next section describes the
research questions emerging from these ideas and outlines the methodology applied to answer
these questions.

**Research Questions**

This study used a mixed-methods research design. Creswell (2013) stated that a well-
designed mixed-methods study explicitly states the research questions and hypothesis for each
aspect of the study: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods, appearing in the order of
implementation. This section outlines the study’s hypothesis and research questions in the
manner suggested by Creswell. The rationale for using a mixed-methods approach will be
explained in detail in the following section.

**Quantitative Hypothesis**

The quantitative hypothesis of this study was: Parents’ perceptions of their relationship with
their children’s’ schools in communities with above median incomes will vary by socioeconomic
status. The specific sub-questions (SQ) for this phase were:

- **SQ1.** Does socioeconomic status influence perceptions of engagement among parents in
  high-income public schools?
- **SQ2.** How do parents’ perceptions vary among different socioeconomic backgrounds?
- **SQ3.** In which areas of engagement do similarities and differences exist?
Qualitative Research Questions

The qualitative research question was: How do parents of children in a high-income public-school system describe their relationship with the school? The specific sub-questions for the qualitative phase were:

SQa To what do they attribute their experiences? (positive, negative, neutral?)

SQb Do their perceptions vary by socioeconomic status?

Mixed-Methods Research Question

According to Leavy (2017), the mixed-method research question “addresses the mixed-methods nature of the study by asking… about what is learned by combining the quantitative and qualitative data” (p. 167). The mixed-methods research question for this study was: How does the qualitative interview data explain why and/or how perceptions of engagement do or do not vary by socioeconomic status? Comparing and contrasting the two sets of data may inform new questions on this topic.

Research Method Rationale

Sidel (1987) notes that “statistics… are people with the tears washed off” (p. xxiv). She asserts that when researchers merely consider people as statistical categories, such as “struggling third grader,” “single-parent household,” or “low-income families”, we obscure their humanity. Quantitative research situates the researcher and the reader at a distance from their participants. This, perhaps, makes difficult topics easier to contemplate. The cost, however, is high. Research produced without an understanding of a person’s direct experience may produce policies, frameworks, and programs that may not be effective. Moreover, ignoring the qualitative side of research might promote unintended consequences.
A mixed-methods research design addresses Sidel’s (1987) assertion by balancing and combining quantitative and qualitative data. This pragmatic approach gathers as much information as possible on a research question producing “a more complete understanding of a research problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4) and what Leavy (2017) labels a “comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 9). The intricacy of the research questions above were best addressed by combining the narrow and specific information provided by a quantitative approach, with the deeply human perspective provided through a qualitative approach. I chose to gather quantitative and qualitative data in order to capture broader data, to allow the qualitative data provides to balance the quantitative data and to develop “meaningful and defensible conclusions” (Plano Clark, 2019, p. 107). In short, this study began with an online survey of families regarding their relationship with their child’s public school and followed up with parent interviews to explore this relationship deeply.

Plano Clark (2019) stresses that without advanced planning, the quantitative and qualitative approaches may not be in “dialogue” (p. 109). Thus, I paid close attention to the dialogue between the quantitative and qualitative portions of this study which have evolved over time. Early iterations of the research design resembled an *Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Design* (Figure 3.1). In such a design, results from the quantitative phase inform the qualitative phase by providing data to adjust the interview questions. This sequence allows the quantitative data to connect to, and inform, the qualitative. However, the research process evolved over time, resulting in quantitative data collection that overlapped with the qualitative segment of the study. Therefore, the original research design evolved into a *Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Design* (Figure 3.2).
In the *Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Design*, quantitative and qualitative data were gathered and analyzed simultaneously. Subsequently, the quantitative and qualitative results were integrated through comparison and interpreted. In this approach, areas of overlap or divergence produced questions with the potential to reveal new understandings.

Plano Clark (2019) emphasizes the importance of focusing on how research methods and results will be integrated and lists four questions related to integration:

1. Why integrate?
2. What to integrate?
3. When to integrate?
4. How to integrate?

Integration of quantitative and qualitative data in a mixed-methods study is critical and will be discussed in depth in Chapter Four. For the purposes of this chapter, the section that follows elaborates on features of the research design that was utilized in the present study.

**Figure 3.1**
*Creswell’s (2017) Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Research Design*
Role of Researcher

My interest in this topic emerged from my own experiences and observations as a teacher and as a parent. Given this personal connection, I realized that I needed to be critically aware of my worldview and work to uncover my own biases and assumptions. Glesne (1972) agrees, stating that the researcher’s duty is become aware of where they stand “…philosophically and politically on doing research” (p. 16). Leavy (2017) observes that researchers’ worldviews are like “sunglasses;” they “influence everything we see” (p. 12). Adopting Leavy’s metaphor, this section will describe my “sunglasses.”

Standpoint theory is central to this research project because it encourages the researcher to consider power relationships in their work (Harding, 2005). For example, developing an awareness of discrepancies in power between the study participants and the researcher, as well as among participants. This awareness can uncover important contextual factors and alter our vision of what is accepted as truth. Harding (2005) describes these foundational elements as the “abstract conceptual frameworks legitimated by dominant philosophies” (p. 354). Incorporating diverse voices allows the researcher to move beyond the study of a single group and toward the relationships among groups. “Studying up”, as described in Chapter One, is one way to envision
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standpoint theory in research. It is with this intention that my research design included the study of relationship among families of different socioeconomic backgrounds within a specific type of community.

Furthermore, the use of standpoint theory reveals fundamental assumptions that influence the way researchers understand their topic. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) asks, “how does collective fantasy color collective life?” (p. 40). In education, “collective fantasies” emerge from dominant narratives about students and families. Every school system has expectations with which families are expected to agree with and comply. Without studying up and sideways, educators are potentially complicit subscribers to the “collective fantasy” about how families and schools should relate. If researchers do not address unexamined assumptions, “collective fantasies” that may not be appropriate for all families can thrive. Doing so also ignores potential “side effects” of policies, which may not only be ineffective, but also result in unwanted and counterproductive outcomes (Zhao, 2018).

This project also included phenomenological and transformational perspectives. Phenomenology finds collective meaning among individuals’ “lived experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76), typically associated with a single phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010, p. 33). In this study, the participants were parents of students in public schools in communities with median income above the state average. The phenomenon was parents’ experiences with the family-school relationship, considered through the lenses of their socioeconomic status. The qualitative interviews embodied a phenomenological approach intended to uncover and communicate parents’ “human condition” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010, p. 34), revealed through survey and interview data.
Aligning with Creswell’s (2014) description, I also embraced a transformational worldview because this research aims to transform knowledge through research (p. 18). Qualitative research has the potential to shift perspectives by enabling the researcher to connect others to the human experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010; Glesne, 2011), and this shift in perspective has the potential to transform understandings of how families relate to schools. Musumeci (2005) captures this idea by stating that qualitative research can “take the stories of others and make their meaning visible” (p. 187). Lastly, the mixed-methods design of this study was intended to spark fresh perspectives and raise new questions within a school context. Standpoint theory, phenomenology and transformational worldviews provide a philosophical foundation for this study. These understandings, taken together and analyzed (see Chapter Four) through this design, informed new information about parent perceptions of the family-school relationship.

**Selection of Participants**

This survey targeted families with children attending public schools in communities with a median household income of $150,000 per year or higher. The regional setting was the geographical area surrounding a large city on the East Coast. Selected towns were within 30 miles of the city, had a total population between 12,000 and 33,000, and had median household incomes of $150,000 or more, as determined by the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.). The racial and ethnic composition of the target communities were similar. Town populations were 80% or higher White. Each community also had affordable and low-income housing options for residents who are elderly, have disabilities, and for families and individuals with limited financial means. This created pockets of socioeconomic diversity within an otherwise homogeneous setting. Affordable housing supports home purchases for families with eligible
incomes. Low-income housing is funded by either federal or state’s housing authorities and residents must meet specific criteria in order to qualify.

The survey sampled parents with children in kindergarten through grade 12 within these targeted communities and was distributed primarily through email and social media. Participation required access to the internet and a device to utilize the technology: phone, tablet or computer. I distributed the survey through friends and acquaintances in these communities and posted the survey to social media sites. In both cases, I requested others to forward and repost the link.

In order to recruit participants for the qualitative phase, I used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling uses “multiple strategies based on the premise that seeking out the best cases for the study produces the best data” (Leavy, 2017, p. 265). Strategies included a question on the survey that asked, “Would you like to volunteer to be interviewed as part of this study? Please share your name and email.” Seventy participants responded, including those stating “no.” Thirty-six offered to be interviewed and 30 lived in the target state and had provided complete survey responses. I contacted five participants for interviews by employing heterogeneity sampling approach. This approach focused on interviewing participants from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds (Leavy, 2017). Therefore, interviewees lived in the target communities and reflected either the upper or lower ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. One participant lived in public housing and the other four owned their own homes. I recruited two more interviewees via snowball sampling which locates participants through “people who know people who meet the research interests” (Glesne, 2011, p. 45). These interviewees lived in either low-income or affordable housing.
Data Collection

As noted earlier, this mixed-methods study used a *Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Design* (Creswell, 2014, p. 15). In this approach, quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed individually and then integrated by “comparing to see if the findings confirm or disconfirm each other” (p. 219). This survey also functioned to identify interviewees for the qualitative portion.

**Survey.** The quantitative segment of data collection employed a survey of family engagement called *Parent Survey for K-12 Schools* (Monkey, n.d.-a) that was developed, and benchmarked, by the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). The survey is designed as a five-point Likert scale, which has been validated, found to be reliable, and is freely available on the survey building site, Survey Monkey. The *Survey Monkey Parent Survey for K-12 Schools* offered 48 questions focused on parental support, child behaviors, parent engagement, parent self-efficacy, school climate, school program fit, and parent roles and responsibilities.

This research study used the guiding questions at the end of Chapter One to select questions in three main areas: perceptions of the family-school relationship, school fit, and school climate. According to Survey Monkey, school fit “measures how well [a] child fits into the school culture” (Survey Monkey, n.d.-c). School climate evaluates parents’ perceptions of the school atmosphere (Survey Monkey, n.d.-b). The benefits of using a preexisting survey questions were threefold: 1) the survey was developed by HGSE, established leaders in the area of family engagement, 2) it has been extensively tested, and 3) the survey questions have been used by more than 10,000 schools, providing benchmarks against which results can be compared (Survey Monkey, n.d.-a).
Three types of questions were included in the survey: demographic questions, open response questions, and Likert-scale questions. As mentioned above, the Likert scale questions were clustered into three areas (general perceptions of the family-school relationship, school fit, and school climate). Dividing these questions into clusters allowed me to hone my examination of family perceptions of the family school relationship. Below, I describe each question and cluster in greater detail. The survey questions are presented in Appendix B and the survey protocol is available in Appendix C.

**Interviews.** In this study, I used in-depth interviews to extend and examine the information gathered through the survey. I used a semi-structured approach to interviewing in which the interviewer continues to develop questions as the interview unfolds with the purpose of gathering deeper information about both anticipated and unanticipated directions (Glesne, 2011). At the beginning of each interview, I gave each participant an overview of the research study and asked if they had any questions. Next, I explained that they could stop the interview at any time and could refuse to answer any question at any point. I also described how I planned to maintain confidentiality and safeguard their privacy. The full protocol is available in Appendix C.

The interview questions (available in Appendix D) explored the same topics as the survey questions but in greater depth. The research question for the qualitative portion of this study asked: How do parents of children in a high-income public-school system describe their relationship with the school? The interview questions were designed to answer this question. The first sub-question, SQa, sought to understand parental perceptions of the family-school relationship in greater depth by eliciting detailed stories about parents’ experiences with their children’s schools and the second sub-question, SQb, focused on potential differences by
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socioeconomic background among interviewees. The survey protocol is included in Appendix E and the Informed Consent Form is available in Appendix F.

**Instrumentation.** The Survey Monkey K-12 Parent Survey contained a series of questions specifically designed to gauge perceptions of the family-school relationship. This study’s survey contained a total of 22 items. Seven questions collected demographic information about the respondent’s child. These questions gathered information about the family’s location, grade of child, respondent gender, child gender, relationship to child, race/ethnicity of child, and approximate income. Ten Likert scale questions of the family-school relationships developed by HGSE measured perceptions of the family-school relationship, and four questions were open response, eliciting further information from participants.

The 5-point Likert scale questions of family engagement were focused in the three areas described above. Questions three, four and five were general questions assessing parental confidence in schools, numbers of school visits, and knowledge of a child’s social world. Taken together, these questions could provide a general view of how parents view their relationship with their children’s school.

Questions seven, eight, nine and ten focused on school fit and explored whether parents felt their child’s school was a good fit for their child's learning style and discipline needs, the extent to which students felt a sense of belonging, and whether parents felt students were being well prepared academically for the next school year. Taken together, this cluster of questions could provide insight into how parents perceive school alignment with their child’s needs and parental educational goals. The final questions, twelve, thirteen and fourteen, assessed parental perception of school atmosphere. These questions centered on the extent to which students enjoyed attending school and how well schools valued diversity and respected their students. In total, the
10 survey questions highlighted aspects of the family-school relationship which parents view as successful or unsuccessful.

Survey Reliability

Researchers at HGSE developed the *Parent Survey for K-12 Schools* in conjunction with “scholars, practitioners, and parents.” The process, argues the author, “ensured our scales captured the essential aspects of family-school relations” (Schueler, 2014). The authors also tested these surveys with parents in order to refine the questions (Schueler, Capotosto, Bahena, McIntyre, & Gehlbach, 2014). As of 2014, the survey had been used in more 1,000 public schools across 300 districts (Schueler, 2014). This survey was been proven reliable and valid through a process that included, testing, parent interviews and focus groups (Gehlbach & Brinkworth, n.d.). In similar fashion, a pilot version of this survey was tested among a small group of parents in one target community. I used these initial responses to make slight adjustments to the language introducing the survey and I added the option of “other” to questions regarding gender.

Interview Questions

The interview questions were developed to extend the survey questions. The main objective of the interview questions was to provide depth and context to the survey data. Questions one and two requested demographic information. These questions were intentionally simple in order to set the participant at ease. Question one requested the names and grades of the interviewee’s children and question 2 invited description of the children’s schools.

Questions three and ten gathered general information about the family-school relationship. Question three asked the participant to describe their children. The sub-questions explored the parent’s perceptions of their children’s needs by including prompts about child likes and dislikes.
and by asking about the parent’s goals for their children. Question ten assessed the parents view of their role and purpose in their children’s education. Together, these questions produced information about parents’ general perception of their children’s schools.

Questions four, seven, and eight examined parent’s perceptions of school fit by asking about their satisfaction with their children’s schools, whether their goals were being met by the children’s schools, and if the parent’s view of their own role in education matched that of the school. These three questions elicited information about areas of connection and divergence with their children’s schools.

The final three questions, numbers five, six, and nine asked parents to share their views of the school’s atmosphere. Question five examined how parents believed the school regarded parental knowledge and input, question six examined areas of similarity or divergence in parental roles in education, and question nine solicited feedback about areas in which the school might be perceived as approving or disapproving of families. Collectively, these questions encouraged feedback about the sense of similarity and/or difference between school staff and parents. Finally, question eleven invited participants to share any other pertinent information.

**Data Analysis**

As discussed previously, the survey data was clustered into three groups. Furthermore, the survey collected three types of responses – Likert scale, demographic and open response. This framework allowed the researcher to look at the Likert scale data by individual question and also by clusters in order to compare and contrast demographic groups to observe similarities and differences. By breaking the data into three clusters, the researcher was able to compare and contrast parental perceptions for each cluster of question by respondent socioeconomic background. As the data were gathered, it became clear that using Excel to create a visual
representation would be a good first step in analysis. Next, I used the statistical software program, IBM SPSS Statistics to compare the means of each sub-group’s responses. There are a number of ways to compare means. I chose to run $t$-tests for independent means on individual questions, clusters of questions, and the sum of response to all ten Likert scale questions.

Analysis of the qualitative data began with transcription. Transcription is not an objective act. Mishler (1991) notes that the inclusion and exclusion of material is inherent to the process of transcription. Davidson (2009) agrees, and posits that thoughtful, intelligent inclusion and exclusion are, in fact, a strength. Furthermore, transcription alone is not enough. Reinhartz (2009) emphasizes the importance of observing non-verbal communication, in addition to speech and content, during interviews. I took notes on speech patterns and non-verbal cues during and after interviews. As I transcribed, I took notes, capturing ideas sparked by listening intently to the participants words. I also highlighted words and phrases which stood out to me. Lastly, and with these concepts in mind, I developed a marking system using a modified version of Mishler’s stanza technique (Varda Shaked, personal communication, March 4, 2014).

Once transcription of the interviews was completed, I planned to analyze the transcripts using thematic analysis, in which the researcher examines “the data for themes and patterns” (Glesne, 2011, p. 187). This analysis was done manually through an iterative process that coded responses into groups, noting areas of similarities, differences and “tension” among participants (p. 188). Over multiple sessions, I coded the data by combining, collapsing, and breaking apart participant responses. Chapter Four describes the analytical process and their results in greater detail.
Limitations

This study has several limitations, including the limited sample size in both the quantitative and qualitative sections. The survey did not receive many responses from participants earning under $50,000. By definition, the target communities are primarily comprised of individuals with higher incomes. There are simply fewer people who meet the lower income criteria. Moreover, this study was promoted via email and social media. Families with lower incomes may not participate in the same social media platforms and networks as their neighbors with higher incomes. Participants may also not have internet access, a computer, or an appropriate device to complete an online survey. In hindsight, using a paper survey alongside a digital survey may have yielded more responses.

Additionally, I was surprised by the number of survey respondents who earned over $200,000. This category represented 54% of the sample. Ideally, this question would have offered more high-income categories, for example, increments of $50,000 until $1 million. Expanding these options might have yielded new and different information.

A third limitation is that surveys are self-reported, which can lead to bias and errors. First, parents who are interested in answering a survey about education may be self-selecting. Those who think about their child’s schooling might be more likely to participate. Second, despite very clear directions to the contrary, people from far outside the target area responded. This included one overseas participant. Likewise, although the survey was clearly marked for public school families, some families responded for children in private schools. I used the open responses to filter the outliers listed above, but it is possible that I missed some. The inclusion of survey data from families with children in private or parochial schools would bring these findings into question.
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A fourth limitation of this study is that generalizability of qualitative data is naturally restrained. This study focused on one, very specific type of community, therefore, the findings are not generalizable. For example, some research indicates that in addition to parenting focus and practices varying across race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, regional and global variations may also be possible (Levine & Levine, 2016). These different foci may also pose a limitation to this study because different regions of the United States might respond differently despite similar profiles. Likewise, a fifth limitation is that while interviewees are presumably telling the truth as they understand it, their views may be biased or limited.

One final limitation is that of “backyard research,” defined as when the researcher studies his or her own group. According to Glesne (2011), “when you are already familiar with a culture… your angles of vision are narrowed by preferred assumptions about what is going on” (p. 41). I am a parent of children in elementary and high school, and we live in a town with a similar profile to that of my target communities. Therefore, this study focused on schools, families, children, and parents akin to those in my hometown and, moreover, participants in this study were similar to me. This familiarity was a strength in some ways. I was familiar with the culture, goals, and dreams of some parents with incomes above the area median income. However, I also held assumptions and biases about what does and does not work in education and in the family-school relationship. This may have prevented me from seeing larger themes or from engaging on specific topics. My familiarity with the study population meant that I was also exploring the experiences of parents in communities similar to mine but from other socioeconomic backgrounds (some with incomes higher and some lower than my own). I worked to identify my preconceived notions about their experiences, educational concerns, and hopes for their children.
My role as a researcher was to actively uncover and managing these beliefs. According to Miles (1979), the process of analysis is a critical part of research and should be “explicitly stated” (p. 569). Moreover, Glesne (2012) reminds us that analysis requires the creation of boundaries, and boundary creation is, at its core, an exercise in interpretation. Amir (2005) concurs, pointing out that the process of open coding is, by nature, interpretive since every decision either includes, excludes, or classifies information.

Miles’s (1979), Glesne’s (2011), and Amir’s (2005) statements are true for analysis but equally true for every aspect of the research process from the conception of a project through the presentation of data and analysis. Therefore, at every stage of research, I employed the reflexive techniques of bracketing and field logs as a way to keep my biases and assumptions in plain view during every phase of this research. Amir offers “bracketing” as a way to examine and reflect upon assumptions (p. 368). Bracketing is the process of routinely reflecting on one’s own biases and assumptions while engaged in every aspect of research. Similarly, a reflective field log, kept at every stage of the research process, allows the researcher to capture “analytic thoughts as they occur” (Glesne, p. 189). Through these methods, I hoped to remain cognizant of my own assumptions and biases as I moved through the quantitative and qualitative research phases.

Summary

I was drawn to three methodological ideas. First, that a mixed-methods research design was a pragmatic approach to answering this studies research hypothesis and questions. Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches would result in more complex data, which are better suited to the complex questions under consideration. Second, standpoint theory provided a framework that allowed this study to look “up, down and sideways” and prevented one-sided depictions and overly simplistic solutions. Lastly, qualitative research “gets to the big things
through the little things…” (Varda Shaked, personal communication, February 25, 2014). This idea underscores the power of the personal perspective to illuminate important themes in life and the possibility that quantitative and qualitative data can be married through the stories of participants. This chapter outlined research questions, study design and rationale, and methods for data collection and analysis. The framework described previously will result in the comprehensive analysis in Chapter Four.
Chapter 4

Introduction

Chapter Four presents the results of both the Survey Monkey K-12 Parent Survey and the findings from the semi-structured interviews. This mixed-methods study examined parent perceptions of the family-school relationship across socioeconomic status in high average income suburbs of a large city on the East Coast of the United States. Both the quantitative and qualitative data were collected in the summer of 2019. Survey data were collected from parents of children in grades ranging from Kindergarten through grade 12 in public schools. A total of 196 surveys were collected. One hundred and fifteen of these were from the five target communities described below. Interviews were conducted with seven volunteers - three with incomes of $50,000 and below and four with incomes at or above the local average of $150,000. Each interviewee resided in one of the five target communities.

As described in Chapter Three, the original research design was for an exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach in which the quantitative data would inform the interview questions. Instead, the survey responses accumulated and evolved over multiple outreach attempts. As a result, interviews began while survey data were still being collected. The exploratory sequential mixed-methods research effectively became what Creswell (2014) refers to as a concurrent mixed-methods approach, in which both quantitative and qualitative data are analyzed simultaneously and then integrated through comparing and contrasting the results of the quantitative portion with the findings in the qualitative section.

Quantitative Results

The quantitative portion of this study explored how socioeconomic status influences perceptions of the family-school relationship among parents with a wide range of income levels,
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whose children attend suburban public schools in high-income communities. The quantitative hypothesis of this study was: Parents’ perceptions of their relationship with their children’s’ schools in communities with above median incomes will vary by socioeconomic status. The specific sub-questions (SQ) for this phase were:

SQ1. Does socioeconomic status influence perceptions of engagement among parents in high-income public schools?

SQ2. How do parents’ perceptions vary among different socioeconomic backgrounds?

SQ3. In which areas of engagement do similarities and differences exist?

Survey responses totaled 196 after eight weeks. Eighty-one responses were set aside because they were mostly incomplete, or respondents were outside the target communities. After eliminating these surveys, I had 115 surveys from the five target communities. I exported the Likert data from Survey Monkey into Excel and IBM SPSS, statistical analysis software tool. Data was converted from the 5-point Likert Scale into a numerical scale in which each of the five Likert values was converted to a number. For example, the lowest score was represented as a 1 and the highest score, a 5. In Excel, I created pivot charts which I used for an initial visual analysis. In SPSS, I ran descriptive statistics and performed independent t-tests to compare the means for each income group for each of the ten survey questions. Each respondent’s numerical responses were added for each cluster of questions. The resulting number was given its own category and title: Sum of General Perception, Sum of School Fit, and Sum of School Climate. Lastly, scores from all ten questions were totaled into a category titled Total Perception. The null hypothesis for these tests were: there is no difference between the means for the two income categories: under $150,000 and $150,000 and above.
Demographics of Respondents

Demographic survey questions included information about the respondent and the respondent’s child, including: respondent community, child grade level, respondent gender, child gender, child race/ethnicity, and average income. In the full sample, survey responses represented 196 participants. Most respondents identified as “mothers” (90.96%). Children’s grade levels in the full sample were roughly equal across elementary (34%), middle (30%) and high school (37%). Furthermore, the majority of survey takers identified their children as Caucasian (78.92%), followed by Asian (6.63%), multiple ethnicity (6.02%), Hispanic and African American/Black (each at 4.22%). Child gender was equally distributed between male (50.6%) and female (48.8%), with one respondent only selecting “other.”

For this study, survey respondents were filtered by location which produced the target sample. The target sample narrowed the number of respondents to a sample size of 115 persons. The target sample consisted of five towns which met the study criteria of high, median income levels, low diversity, and local housing authorities. The presence of local housing creates a wide socioeconomic range in these towns, which included families who earn less than the U.S. poverty threshold through those who earn significantly more than the median income level for their community (Table 4.1). The populations in these five towns were also consistent across income, poverty rates, racial and ethnic background and the presence of a housing authority.
Table 4.1

Profile of Five Target Towns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Median Income</th>
<th>Poverty</th>
<th>Percentage White</th>
<th>Housing Authority?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>31,000</td>
<td>$142,000</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>$197,000</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>29,000</td>
<td>$177,000</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>23,000</td>
<td>$134,000</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>70% (25% Asian)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>19,000</td>
<td>$171,000</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>77,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>64,000</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All figures are based on U.S. Census Bureau (2018) data and are rounded to the nearest thousandth.

The demographic characteristics of the target sample are similar to the overall sample. As in the full sample, most respondents in the target towns identify as mothers (90%). The target community responses also have roughly equal distribution across school level; elementary (32.8), middle (32.8), and high school (33.6). However, the gender distribution in the five-town sample had slightly fewer girls (45.1%) than boys (54.6) and respondents were more likely to report income levels above $200,000, the survey’s highest income category. Table 4.2 presents a summary of these data.
### Table 4.2

*Individual and Family Characteristics as Percentage of the Target Sample (n=115)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>59.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child Grade</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary K-5</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle 6-8</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School 9-12</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respondent Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>54.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respondent Relationship to Child</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>89.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Native Alaskan</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic American</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>80.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple ethnicity/other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Visual Analysis

Descriptive statistics offer a point of entry into quantitative data. I transferred the target sample data into Excel spreadsheets and used the pivot chart function to build charts comparing number of responses for each question with socioeconomic data. The socioeconomic data was divided into two categories, $150,000 and above, and below $150,000. This division roughly mirrors the median income in the target sample, which is $165,000 on average. Thirty-three respondents noted incomes below $150,000 and 74 respondents indicated incomes of $150,000 or above.

After examining pivot charts from the five target town spreadsheets, I identified areas of “interocular trauma,” that is, bar graphs with differences so obvious they hit me between the eyes (Ed Bassin, personal communication, Oct. 18, 2019). I identified three survey questions in which sizable differences appeared to exist. For example, the bar graph of survey Question 4 (To what extent do you know how your child is doing socially at school?) revealed a potential area of difference (Figure 4.1). The two highest categories, representing Likert responses 4 and 5, account for nearly 75% of responses under $150,000 and under 40% of those at and above $150,000. According to these data, parents with reported incomes below $150,000 agreed that they knew how their child was faring socially at school at higher rates than their wealthier peers.
Likewise, in Question 7 (At your child’s school, how well does the overall approach to discipline work for your child?) parent perceptions of discipline showed differences across parent income (Figure 4.2). Respondents earning less than $150,000 perceived that school discipline is a good fit at about 45%, while those in the higher income bracket saw school discipline as a good fit more than 60% of the time.
Lastly, Question 12 (To what extent do you think children enjoy going to your child’s school?) also suggested possible differences by income (Figure 4.3). No respondents earning less than $150,000 agreed that students enjoy school “a tremendous amount,” and approximately 50% stated that their child enjoyed school “quite a bit.” However, responses from families with income levels of $150,000 and over perceived enjoyment of school at rates over 65%.
Figure 4.3

*To what extent do you think children enjoy going to your child’s school?*

![Bar chart showing the extent to which children enjoy going to school for two income groups.]

**Independent t-Tests**

To examine whether these differences were statistically meaningful, independent *t*-tests were run on each survey question individually, as well as on the combined scores of each larger grouping: *General Perception*, *School Fit*, and *School Climate*. The independent *t*-test is a parametric test to compare the means of two, unrelated samples. In this study, the two samples are respondents reporting incomes under $150,000 and those reporting incomes of $150,000 and over. A significant result is indicated when *p* is less than .050.

There is debate about whether Likert data that has been converted into numerical forms meets the assumptions required for parametric tests. These assumptions expect that the groups being compared have similar variances, and that sample sizes are representative of the population being studied (at least 30) (Salkind, 2014). However, research indicates that the use of parametric measures with Likert data does not influence or change the results. Therefore,
parametric tests can be used with Likert data “without concern for ‘getting the wrong answer’” (Norman, 2010, p. 625). Norman also notes that, while the disagreement regarding Likert scales and parametric tests “can cease,” it probably will not (p. 632). For the purposes of this study, parametric tests were used to assess significance.

Table 4.3

Independent t-test by Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1.091</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.958</td>
<td>.455</td>
<td>.650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>1.281</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.010</td>
<td>.825</td>
<td>.411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0.890</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.845</td>
<td>2.028</td>
<td>.045*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.030</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>.926</td>
<td>-.695</td>
<td>.489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>1.248</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>.952</td>
<td>-2.364</td>
<td>.020*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.310</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>.930</td>
<td>-1.733</td>
<td>.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>0.839</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>1.061</td>
<td>-1.438</td>
<td>.153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q12</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>1.055</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>.917</td>
<td>-2.418</td>
<td>.017*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>0.927</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.938</td>
<td>-.999</td>
<td>.320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>1.091</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>.734</td>
<td>-.380</td>
<td>.705</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05

Next, I clustered each section into a total score and compared the means of the two socioeconomic categories. An independent samples t-test was calculated comparing the mean scores of parents with different reported median incomes, perception of the relationship with school in three areas: General Perception (Q3-5), School Fit (Q7-10), School Climate (Q11-13) and Total Perception (all Q). No significant differences were found. The mean of the sum of
each category was not significantly different between respondents with incomes of above $150,000 compared with those with incomes below $150,000 (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4

*Independent t-test by Cluster*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Under 150K</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>150K and over</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10.36</td>
<td>2.261</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>9.42</td>
<td>2.559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School fit</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22.39</td>
<td>8.108</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>24.85</td>
<td>7.752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Climate</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10.42</td>
<td>2.077</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>2.358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Perception</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>42.64</td>
<td>12.442</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>44.47</td>
<td>12.795</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The quantitative hypothesis of this study was: Parents’ perceptions of their relationship with their children’s’ schools in communities with above median incomes will vary by socioeconomic status. The specific sub-questions (SQ) for this phase were:

**SQ1.** How does socioeconomic status influence perceptions of engagement among parents in high-income public schools?

**SQ2.** How do parents’ perceptions vary among different socioeconomic backgrounds?

**SQ3.** In which areas of engagement do similarities and differences exist?

Overall, the data demonstrated seven areas with no statistical significance within the individual questions. The three areas identified through visual assessment for “intraocular trauma” (Ed Bassin, personal communication, Oct. 18, 2019) were significant in independent t-tests and hint
at how parents’ perceptions of school might vary by income. In response to SQ1, only three individual questions were significant. The areas are described in detail below.

**Question 5 - To what extent do you know how your child is doing socially at school?**

This question elicited parental perception of a child’s social life at school. The independent *t*-test comparing the mean scores of the above $150,000 median income with the mean score of the below $150,000 median income found a significant difference between the means of the two groups (*t*(104) = 2.028, *p* < .05). The mean of the group over 150,000 was significantly lower (M=3.30, sd = 8.45) than the mean of the under $150,000 group (M=3.67, sd = .890). Parents noting an income of 150,000 and more were significantly less likely to perceive that they knew how well their child was doing socially at school.

**Question 8 - At your child’s school, how well does the overall approach to discipline work for your child?**

This question addressed parental perception of the fit of disciplinary approach at school. The independent *t*-test comparing the mean scores of the $150,000 and above group with the mean score of the below $150,000 group found a significant difference between the means of the two groups (*t*(104) = - 2.364, *p* < .05). The mean of the group under $150,000 was significantly lower (M=3.19, sd = 1.030) than the mean of the $150,000 and over group (M=3.68, sd = .952). Parents reporting income levels of less than $150,000 were significantly less likely to perceive that discipline at school was a good fit.

**Question 12 - To what extent do you think children enjoy going to your child’s school?**

This question assessed parental perception of the degree to which children enjoy attending their child’s school. The independent *t*-test comparing the mean scores of those with incomes below $150,000 with the mean score of those with incomes $150,000 and above found a significant difference between the means of the two groups (*t*(104) = -2.418, *p* < .05). The mean of the
group below $150,000 was significantly lower (M=3.27, sd = 8.39) than the mean of the above
150,000 group (M=3.73, sd = .917). Parents noting an income of less than $150,000 were
significantly less likely to perceive that children enjoyed attending their child’s school. The
language of this question is slightly different from the other questions in the survey. This
question asks about children generally. The other questions ask parents to report on their own
child’s experience. This difference opens possibility for misunderstandings. After answering
questions about their child, parents may have missed the shift in this question and continued
responding from their own child’s experiences at school. Other parents might have understood
the question exactly as stated. The results of this question may not be trustworthy due to
different interpretations of the question.

Summary

The independent t-tests found three significant relationships within the individual items
addressing: a) awareness of social life at school, b) approach to discipline, and c) whether
children enjoyed attending school. The remaining survey questions revealed no significant
differences between groups above and below the $150,000 income point. Nor did aggregate
scores by cluster yield significant results. Lastly, the Total Perception scores of participants did
not show significance by income level.

In summary, parent perceptions about how their child functions socially at school, how
discipline at school does or does not fit the child, and whether children enjoy going to school
differed significantly between families with income levels on either side of $150,000. However,
overall, the survey results did not demonstrate clear differences in perception of the family-
school relationship between families of different income levels. Although three individual
questions indicated significant differences, I prefer to use caution in their interpretation simply
noting that these may be areas for further exploration in the future. Chapter Five will discuss these results in greater detail.

**Qualitative Findings**

The qualitative portion of this study examined how parents in suburbs with higher than average incomes perceive their relationship with their child’s public schools by family income. The research questions for the qualitative portion were:

RQ: How do parents of children in a high-income public-school system describe their relationship with the school?

RQa: To what do they attribute their experiences? (positive, negative, neutral?)

RQb: Do their perceptions vary by socioeconomic status?

The interview questions were developed at the same time as the survey questions were selected. The original research design planned for results from the survey to be gathered first, to allow for the adjustment of interview questions. However, the collection of survey data continued beyond the original plan. Therefore, some quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed concurrently. The next section describes the qualitative analysis and findings. Interpretation of the data and details regarding the integration of quantitative and qualitative data will be presented in the final chapter.

When the survey closed, 24 families indicated a willingness to be contacted for an interview. I chose five names from the target communities and followed up via email. All of those contacted agreed to be interviewed. Four of the initial five volunteers stated incomes of $150,000 and above, and one stated income under $50,000. I located another two volunteers with incomes under $50,000 through snowball sampling. One volunteer connected me with
another parent who had heard about this project and wished to participate. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately one hour, and questions focused on parent perceptions of their relationship with schools.

As a result, a total of seven parents participated in interviews for this study. Among the seven, three claimed incomes under $50,000 and four claimed incomes at or above $150,000, representing a range in socioeconomic backgrounds. Each interview took place at a location of the interviewees choosing such as in a quiet study room at a local public library, or at the participant’s home. All interviews were recorded using an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder after receiving express verbal and written permissions. I also maintained observation notes, collected artifacts and wrote memos on a regular basis.

Coding began early in the qualitative research process with memos and notes taken during and after every interview and continued through analysis and writing. Moreover, as I transcribed interviews, I continued to both take notes and highlight areas of text that stood out. After all interviews were completed and transcribed, I began by reading through the transcriptions and coding line by line as suggested by Glesne (2011). In this opening coding procedure, initial codes were noted in pencil and their corresponding quotes were highlighted in yellow. I also reviewed and coded all field notes and memos. This first phase of coding resulted in eight categories. I transferred these eight categories onto post-it notes, into a notebook and proceeded to physically group, regroup and break them apart, keeping in mind that noticing patterns is equally important to noticing what is missing within the data (Glesne, p. 195).

Next, I revisited the transcriptions and coded using thematic analysis, in which “the researcher focuses on analytical techniques on searching through the data for themes and patterns” (Glesne, 2011, p. 187). This phase, known as “axial coding” combined and collapsed
categories and began to identify themes. Other analytical techniques included the on-going use of memo writing to “capture analytical thoughts” (Glesne p. 189) and maintaining a title file (Glesne, p. 190). I began to “define what the data [I] was analyzing was about” (Glesne, p. 194). As Glesne suggests, this “progressive” and iterative process occurred over many sessions and involved the revisiting of notes, memos, and transcriptions. This deeper examination of interviewee responses expanded the initial eight codes to 19, each of which was color coded within the seven transcriptions.

The next step was to sort codes in “major code clumps” (Glesne, 2011, p. 197) which I transferred to chart paper. Here I manually combined, collapsed and reordered the data to identify patterns and to create hierarchies demonstrating relationships among the data. This deeply analytic process is designed to “find patterns and produce explanations” in qualitative data (Gibbs, p. 5). The final stage, “selective coding”, identified key relationships between and among the data (Gibbs, p.118).

**Demographics**

The interviewee sample included two men and five women. Four earned $150,000 and above while three earned under $150,000. In fact, the three interviewees in the lower income category, noted earnings of under $50,000 a year. Among the seven, five were married and two mothers were single parents. Each family had either two or three children, and while the children ranged from an infant to 18 years of age, most interviewee children were in middle or high school. Three interviewees identified as their families as White. One interviewee described her family as interracial (White and Asian) through adoption. Three family members were identified as White and the fourth Asian through adoption. Another described her family as interracial (White and Black) through marriage. The mother identified as White and she stated
her children were mixed-race, although perceived as Black. Lastly, one interviewee identified her family as Hispanic and another as Middle Eastern. Three families lived in either low-income or affordable housing. Table 4.5 provides the demographic details of this study’s interviewees.

### Table 4.5

*Interviewee Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$150K and Over</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Grade Levels</th>
<th>Martial Status</th>
<th>Child Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>MS, HS</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>one White, one Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>MS, HS</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>MS, MS</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>ES, ES</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Under $150K</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Martial Status</th>
<th>Child Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>MS, MS, HS</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>Two or more races Black and White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Baby, MS, HS</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ada</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>MS, HS</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the interviews an eighth category emerged that I call “other parents.” Most participants described the behavior of “other parents.” Five of the seven contributors painted a
negative picture of “other parents,” while one felt most parents were “normal,” and the last had mixed views. “Other parents” were overwhelmingly depicted as overly involved in, and inappropriately focused on, their children’s education. These parents used high levels of pressure to “push, push, push,” “micromanage”, and “bonsai prune” their children. They advocated for their own child, expecting schools to “get it done.” They actively “bitched” and “complained” by posting angry comments on Facebook. Furthermore, they encouraged their peers to lobby the school administration and elected officials to “apply pressure” until the schools gave in.

Demographically, the “other parents” were described as stay-at-home mothers with a lot of energy and too much time. Nicole described these mothers as “Former investment banker, former corporate lawyer. They want to do something with the school. They can’t do anything except get on Facebook and bitch.” She describes Facebook posts about an 8th grade school trip to Washington, D.C. “What do you mean my kid can only take $100? What if he needs to take a plane back?” and “My kid needs a private room. Can I just get him a reservation at a different hotel and he can meet up with the bus later?”

Generally, it was reported that “other parents” used their energy, time, and financial resources to secure educational advantages for their children, often through less than honest ways, such as unmerited diagnoses of learning disabilities and pressure to move unqualified students into accelerated classes. Thus, “other parents” became an eighth member of this study, one with whom respondents compared their own parenting. In the next section, I outline the findings of the primary research question regarding parent perceptions of their relationship with their child(ren)’s public schools.
RQ: How do parents of children in a high-income public-school system describe their relationship with the school?

Analysis of the data revealed two primary themes emerging in response to the overall research question. Parents in high-income public-school systems described their relationship with their child’s school through three primary lenses: Parent View of the Purpose of Education, Future or Current Concerns, and Being Heard. Each parent’s description of their relationship with their child’s school was based on their beliefs about these ideas. While all parents shared the belief that education is a fundamental part of future success, there were some marked differences among them.

For some, future success was encapsulated by Ben’s view in Chapter 2: ‘good grades = good college = good job’. This category was titled Education as Ladder and was defined by a linear and academically focused view of school and learning. This category had two sub-categories, Being Better Than and Straight A’s. The goal of parents who embraced an Education as Ladder was to boost their child as high up the educational ladder as they could, preferably as early, and as quickly, as possible. The second category, Education for Personhood, was a broader view of school and learning, with two sub-categories, Balance and Real Learning. Here, the emphasis was on the development of a functional, well-balanced adult, a process in which academics represented just one piece. For these parents, education was about finding balance in life and a love of learning. Both Education as Ladder and Education for Personhood provided frameworks from which parents described their relationships to schools. These findings are presented in Table 4.6.
Win the Game or Build Decent Humans? Parental Perceptions of the Family School-Relationship Across Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Table 4.6

*Parent View of the Purpose of Education: Categories, Subcategories and Example Quotes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Example Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education as Ladder</td>
<td>Being Better Than</td>
<td>“I feel the need to supplement. I push my kids to do more, to stay challenged. Otherwise they would just be getting the same work as everyone else.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Straight A’s</td>
<td>“She is a high honors student. She didn’t get an A-, A’s in <em>everything</em>.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education for Personhood</td>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>“They have to do socially and emotionally well and also academically. They’re equally strong goals for me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Real learning</td>
<td>“Our choice was to opt out of that system.” We want school to “teach to the child, teach skills beyond mastery of the test.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Education as ladder - “It’s up to you to figure out how to beat it, how to beat the game and win.”* *Education as Ladder* encompasses two subcategories: “*Being Better Than*” and “*Straight A’s*”. This category envisions education as a game in which there are winners and losers. In this view, resources are scarce, and the goal of school is to maximize a student’s likelihood of winning the game. Of the seven interviewees, all parents in the higher income category and “other parents” exemplified *Education As Ladder*, but to varying degrees. The first sub-category is *Being Better Than*. Parents who view school as a ladder see value in their child being academically ahead. Math instruction offers a powerful example. Every parent in this study spontaneously mentioned mathematics instruction during their interview. For many, mathematics is a potent symbol of academic success. Five interviewees specifically discussed the importance of acceleration in math, citing either selection for accelerated classes at school, attending afterschool mathematics programs such as the Russian School of Mathematics (RSM), or both. In these communities, placement in accelerated math classes is coveted. Consider Dan,
who describes his daughter as “a high honors student.” She was a “shoo-in” for the accelerated math program. As a result, she feels, “I can do better than this” and wants more: “higher expectations, heavier homework loads, more reading, more rigorous work”. They are considering sending her to a private school. Choosing a private school represents parental choice in education. For Dan and his daughter, private school offers academic advancement. In turn, being ahead of others will result in a brighter future. Chapter Five will explore this concept in detail.

These ideas are echoed by others: a move from accelerated math into honors math is considered a “downgrade” by Nicole’s daughter and Ryan heard that their town is “very into the socio-emotional stuff but tend not to push the kids on the science and math.” He, and especially the “other parents” he knows, have explored supplemental educational programming. Eventually, he enrolled his son in a few sessions of a problem-based mathematics program called MathMania!, which is run by a mathematician with a passion for teaching.

Both Ryan and Dan feel comfortable with mathematics and both have terminal degrees in fields that use math. Ryan is steeped in STEM and feels comfortable teaching his children, noting that “if we need to do science and math stuff, we don’t need to send them to RSM to do that!” Likewise, Dan is confident in his ability to understand the curriculum and support his children. “I’m college educated, I can read the [curriculum] and understand it.” He has been assigning his children math workbooks since 3rd grade and Khan academy in middle school, assuring that his children are ahead of their peers. At school, “the work is easy” and his children are “leaders,” “relaxed,” and “demonstrating mastery”. In his assessment, both children, but especially his daughter, have benefited from being ahead of peers.
Win the Game or Build Decent Humans? Parental Perceptions of the Family School-Relationship Across Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Math is a core issue for “other parents” too. “Other parents” enroll their children in RSM. Ryan reports that these parents “will tell a story that they want their kids to acquire a love of [math] and achieve their potential” in part because they perceive that “the school is not pushing them in the sense that they want [their kids] to achieve academically. Parents “feel very strongly about it.” I asked whether RSM instruction met this goal. Did these students acquire a love of math? Ryan’s reply was quick and firm. “No - the parents are like, we don’t care, we’re going to do it.”

The parents who embrace Education As Ladder also rely on traditional educational symbols as evidence of success. This sub-category, titled Straight A’s, was evident among the all families in the higher income category. Straight A’s were the norm in the families I interviewed and a source of parental pride. Moreover, all interviewees in the $150,000 and over income category also referenced Ivy League schools as symbols of educational success. In one family, both parents attended Ivy League schools, “other parents” hope their child will get into Yale and put effort towards this goal, and a third parent described fellow public high school graduates who attended Harvard instead of the state public university. He said it was “very possible to get into great schools going through the public-school system.” In this parent’s view, Harvard is a “great” school, while a state public university is not. Being Better Than and Straight A’s are seen as traits that will boost a child up the educational ladder. Parents support this approach because they feel deep personal responsibility toward their child. As one parent noted, “It’s up to you to figure out how to beat it, how to beat the game and win.”

Education for Personhood - “Be brave enough to not play the game”. The goal of Education for Personhood is to create happy, balanced adults. The two subcategories are Balance and Real Learning. If Education As Ladder is focused on getting up the educational
ladder as quickly as possible, parents with the *Education for Personhood* approach to school view the ladder as a problem, rather than a solution. These parents see academics as one part of a larger educational goal. They are exploring ways around the wall, critiquing the reasons for the wall, and discussing why ladders and walls exist in the first place.

Ada, Angela and Emily, who all fall in the under $50,000 category, landed squarely in *Education for Personhood*. Shannon, Ryan, and Nicole straddle both approaches, embracing some elements of *Education as Ladder*, and some in *Education for Personhood*. The first subcategory, *Balance*, emerged as a primary concern. For example, when defining goals for her three children, Emily noted “They have to all balance out.” The children “have to do socially, emotionally well and also academically. I think they have to have both. They’re equally strong goals for me.” Angela echoes this idea, stating that “I just want them to succeed in school and love school as much as I did,” but “it’s not all hard work, you know, it could be fun too.” Ada noted that while her daughter was straight-A student, “being with friends and laughing, that’s the most important thing.”

Lastly, the mothers in the lower income category clearly delineated the role academics should play in the development of a well-balanced adult. Emily stated that “however well you do on a certain test or any assignment, does not define who you are as a person.” Ada asserted that parents cannot look at a child’s grades and “assume everything is good,” indicating that school is more than grades. Moreover, there is an awareness among parents on both ends of the income range that a strictly academic approach to schooling is not necessarily related to learning. Nicole notes the damage “striving” and “pressure” put on students, and “in the meantime, the kid doesn’t really learn how to learn!” Instead of being “engaged in learning, [the students] are engaged in getting a grade – they only study exactly what they need to know to get the grade.”
Shannon sees traditional academics as playing an outsized and inappropriate role in schooling, stating, “I believe our system is so broken. It’s breaking our youth. The only solution is to be brave enough to not play the game.”

Finally, parents who prioritize Personhood as a goal identified Real Learning as a priority. Real Learning is different from the traditional academic symbols of success discussed previously. For example, one parent discussed the need for children to develop curiosity and a flexible mindset. He prioritized creativity and highlight internal motivation instead of external motivation. Angela and Emily both discussed the need for kids to love school and learning observing that “you can enjoy your life,” you can “love reading and love learning.” Two parents also point out the immense opportunities which exist in these districts. Nicole, who works with students from low-income communities, echoed that idea, stating that “I work with kids who would kill to have half these opportunities. If they had these classes, they would take it, and run with it. But they don’t.” Angela concurs, remarking, “it’s one of the top districts you know, in the country”.

RQa: To what do they attribute their experiences? (positive, negative, neutral?)

Parents spoke thoughtfully and eloquently about their experiences with their children’s schools and these ideas were filtered through their views of the purpose of education. In general, parents with higher incomes and “other parents” attributed their experiences to concerns about future problems their students might face. They discussed whether schools could adequately educate their child for a highly competitive world. On the other hand, families with incomes lower than the area average were concerned with current problems in schools. In this study, mental health, racial and religious intolerance, and bullying were common issues. See Table 4.
Table 4.7

Concerns about Current or Future Problems: Categories, Subcategories and Example Quotes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Example Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Future Concerns</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I’m frightened of the affluence in this area.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“It’s a good life lesson. If they want more than the minimum, they’re going to have to go get it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Concerns</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>“He was “miserable-crying every day, he wasn’t sleeping, he wasn’t eating.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Racial Intolerance</td>
<td>“Is it because they’re White and my son’s a little bit darker?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“You people move here… You people? I’ve lived here 10 years.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I picked up the phone, she said ‘Hi, you don’t know me…if I don’t say it and your daughter does something to herself, I wouldn’t forgive myself.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>They asked her “So, do you belong to ISIS?” and she said, “Mom, how do I respond?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Future concerns.** Parents who focused on a child’s future problems saw academics as the primary way to address and avoid these issues, although parental ideas about what constitutes academics did not always align. Two parents noted that public schools were poorly matched to their children’s needs and abilities. Dan saw public school as providing only the most basic education and primarily for students who “don’t excel.” Another regarded public education as “for the masses.” Both interviewees had children either applying to, or transitioning into, private schools.

The future economy and job market were areas of anxiety. Shannon noted that her goals for her children were “to be nice decent human beings who can live independently.” However, she noted that economic factors would play into that, “so I fear for them.” Dan extended this idea
arguing that our world has “finite resources,” therefore there will always be competition and a
desire to gain advantage over others.”

While these parents looked to academic achievement as the solution to address future
concerns, their views of academics varied. All parents in the high-income group listed grades,
especially ‘straight-A’s’ as centrally important. However, Dan viewed being ahead of peers by
traditional academic markers including grades, workbooks, Khan Academy and accelerated
classes. Likewise, “other parents” were viewed as promoting future success through traditionally
academic means. Nicole related stories about how her peers take advantage of the system in
order to secure advantage for their children. “You want an IEP for ADHD so that by the time
your child’s a junior, they get extra time on the SAT, PSAT and ACT.” She referenced a Wall
Street Journal article outlining this trend. The article features high schools in wealthy
communities around the country and notes that wealthier districts have higher percentages of
accommodations on standardized tests. These accommodations are often pursued through
private testing, which ranges in cost from $3,000 to $10,000. In one high school outside of
Boston, a third of students receive accommodations on tests, which the superintendent finds
unlikely (Belkin, Levitz, & Korn, 2019).

Nicole’s peer group had already been discussing this as an option for their students. This
article became the subject of discussion among them on social media, and rather than prompting
concern about this strategy, she says it was “a call to action.” After all, argued one parent, “if
everyone else has it, then isn’t my son at a disadvantage?” “Other parents,” in Nicole’s
experience, dismiss all but most traditional academic markers. Instead of supporting a child
struggling with social emotional skills or mental health issues, they say, “my kid doesn’t need
that, he needs to get back in school!” Otherwise, he will fall behind and never attend a “good” college. However, Nicole noted, that this child is 12 years old and “college is in six years.”

Emily also observed these tendencies in “other parents.” In her view, “other parents” desired their students to be the “top kids,” “in the top 1%” and try to achieve this goal through what she called “push, push, push.” Similarly, Nicole recalled her daughter’s friend sitting in her kitchen, crying because she received a B and lamenting that she “didn’t study enough.” Nicole pinpoints “other parents” as the source of this pressure. “Other parents’” expectations are unrealistically high and focused on the parent’s vision of success. In this philosophy, grades and acceleration are key to future success and, as one interviewee stated, if you are not motivated to get good grades, “why I am wasting my time” with you?

While some respondents saw traditional academic markers as key to alleviating future problems, two embraced elements of both traditional and non-traditional education. For example, Shannon sees her daughter as “bright and intelligent.” a classic student who is mature, attentive and a “rule follower.” She identified her daughter’s intelligence through grades and saw these elements as a path towards a “prestigious” and “very competitive” college. However, Shannon also viewed her district’s emphasis on test preparation, testing, and elite college admissions as problematic and unhealthy. “It’s a herd, students spend four years killing themselves to be in the herd.” Similarly, while Ryan valued his son’s interest in science and math and felt that, compared to their peers, “we’re pretty confident that academically they’re going to be fine.” That said, he prioritized curiosity, feedback loops and internal motivation over grades and acceleration.

**Current concerns.** The current concerns absorbing the attention of parents in this study are significant. Three school-based problems emerged from the data: mental health, racial and
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religious intolerance, and on-going bullying. Three parents reported their children experiencing significant mental health issues including hospitalizations for depression, drug abuse, self-harm, and bipolar disorder. Each parent described challenges in communicating their child’s needs to the school during and after serious mental health issues. For example, three parents reported difficulties in securing appropriate accommodations from the schools to protect their child’s mental health during reentry to the school. One guidance counselor ignored the student’s reentry plan in favor of a completely inappropriate “tough love, get her butt back to school” approach. Likewise, another parent, bringing evidence of depression to the school’s attention, was dismissed because in school’s opinion, “he seems fine.”

Moreover, every parent with a child who was not White or a religious minority told stories of intolerance. These stories ranged in depth and impact. For example, in a social studies class focused on racial stereotypes, the teacher only covered stereotypes about people who are Black and Hispanic. The student was Asian and eager to hear about stereotypes he’d experienced personally, only to have the teacher skip Asian stereotypes completely. His takeaway, said his mother, was that the school believes that “Asian people are like White people”.

Accelerated math reemerged as a topic, but in the context of racial equity instead of Education As Ladder. Despite flourishing in elementary school mathematics, every one of Emily’s children was recommended for remedial mathematics programming in middle school. She believes the color of their skin drove not only the remedial recommendations, but the failure of the school to put her children (and other non-White students) into accelerated programming. She allowed one son to attend the remedial math program because “I didn’t want the school to think that I’m neglecting my child because they think he needs support but I’m insisting he
doesn’t.” Emily’s decision was not solely focused on the needs of her son. It was also driven by an understanding that rejecting a school recommendation could define her as a neglectful mother.

Lastly, Ada described a systematic bullying campaign lasting two school years. In November of the first year, she received a phone call from another mother whom she did not know. The call began, “Hi, you don’t know me, but my daughter is in the same class as your daughter.” The tale unwound through tears. Ada’s daughter was regularly ostracized by her peers - not just one or two children, but most students in the grade 7 ‘pod’ (approximately 70 children) boys and girls alike, constantly called her “sleazy.” The taunt insinuated inferiority and otherness. This insult followed her daughter through school over two years. During classes they’d whisper, “Sleazy’s raising her hand,” and “Sleazy talked.” In the halls, they’d point “oh, here’s sleazy,” and on social media, classmates simply replied “sleazy” to every post. Once, they threw away her classwork while the teacher wasn’t looking because she “wrote too much.” Although the reasons for this bullying were not entirely obvious, her classmates did reference her Middle Eastern heritage, asking “do you belong to ISIS?” Two years passed in this way, and while the principal was responsive and teachers were made aware of the problem, nothing changed. As Ada said, “you can stand up to one bully, two bullies, but if the whole pod is calling you sleazy?”

These parents implicated “other parents” and implicit bias in school staff as contributing to the issues their children experienced in school. Parents who adopt Education As Ladder were understood to put energy into their children’s academic success to the detriment of their children’s social and psychological development. They are also perceived as unaware of the serious impact of their parenting choices, after all, “when they bully, they damage people for life.” Ada asserts that “the way [kids] are raised at home and I can’t say ‘oh no, it doesn’t reflect
on the parent’s behavior.’ It does. Very, very much.” In her mind, teaching tolerance and compassion for others should take priority over anything else.

Likewise, Ada believed that her district’s anti-bullying curriculum was “just a waste of time and money.” “Parents, of course, should do something [about bullying], but teachers should say more” as well. “Instead of doing all these workshops, teachers should have less work and observe more.” Nicole commented that the high pressure coming from some families influences everyone. “It’s the mentality of, if you don’t get the grade, it’s not worth it. And the teachers feel the pressure from the parents,”, which in turn, influences classroom life and expectations.

A stark example of the role “other parents” have in influencing current concerns came from Emily. Every year, her children trick-or treat-with their good friends, and while none of the children present as White, all attend school in the same town. However, every Halloween, the children are routinely asked, “Oh where are you from?”, even though they lived in that same neighborhood. Emily concludes that the color of her children’s skin led neighbors to “assume they’re not from here.” However kindly these questions were meant, she reports that they were upsetting to the children. Moreover, these questions revealed a deep lack of awareness on the part of other members of this community. They failed to realize that not only were these children a part of their town, they’d been living there for more than five years. Emily commented that “the kids came back and told me. They were very aware of what was happening.” Emily’s story unveils hidden and pervasive assumptions about who belongs in her community. These assumptions exist not only in her neighborhood, but also in the schools.

**RQb: Do their perceptions vary by socioeconomic status?**

Although race, class and power are difficult to tease apart, the qualitative data does indicate that socioeconomic status is responsible for some variations in parent perceptions. Interestingly,
these results are much clearer than those from the quantitative segment of this study. In general, 

*Education as Ladder* and *Future Concerns* were composed of parents earning more than 

$150,000 a year, although some interviewees bridged more than one category. On the other 

hand, parents earning under $50,000 fit more comfortably into the categories of *Education for 

Personhood* and *Current Concerns.* All parents in the qualitative portion of the study adopted 

strategies to manage their relationship with the school system. Moreover, these strategies were 

designed to realize their vision of education. Parental strategies fell into two categories: *Being 

Heard* and *Parental Resources.* These concepts are illustrated in Table 4.8.

**Being heard.** *Being Heard* was a clearly related to socioeconomic status in this study. The 

parents in the over $150,000 category navigated their school relationships relatively smoothly. 

For example, the two White men, both in the over $150,000/year category, described seamless 

relationships with their children’s schools. Both participated in school leadership activities such 

as School Councils and District Strategic Planning Groups. Through these forums, their ideas 

about education were solicited and respected. From Dan’s perspective, schools want parent 

input. “They will take parents off the street. I simply had to raise my hand and say I’m 

interested.” For him, joining a governance group was easy and he was welcomed without 

question. He also had a flexible job that allowed him to attend the mid-week, afternoon meetings. 

Ryan’s background as a parent, STEM professional, and a higher education employee made him 

sought after. He was invited to join the district level Strategic Planning Committee. Moreover, 

he described a smooth relationship with the teachers at his children’s school. His son’s previous 

teacher felt comfortable enough to email him with a science question, indicating a seamless 

relationship with the school.
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For other participants, *Being Heard* was not so simple. The two White women in the top-tier income group had less easy relationships with their children’s schools. Both described situations in which their views of their children’s needs conflicted with that of the schools. Both employed persistence, communication, and pressure. Both also used their professional expertise to sharpen and deliver their messages. For example, Nicole’s daughter needed a quiet space to ease her transition from mental health treatment into school. She approached the school principal, outlined the problem and proposed a school quiet space. The principal pushed back, citing money and space issues, along with staff limitations. However, Nicole stood her ground and told the principal, “in a former life, I was a project manager. Just let me do this.” She was successful, although she took on the work of developing, implementing and funding the quiet space out of her own money.

Likewise, Shannon observed that her son was struggling. She approached the school staff who denied that he needed special support. After multiple attempts to work with her son’s teacher and the school administrator, Shannon paid for private testing, employed outside experts to advocate for her son’s needs, hired a lawyer, and used her skills as a “professional writer” to produce a “very clear statement” that “was not friendly” and did “not mince words.” The school staff relented. These two incidents were stressful and challenging for these mothers, but they were able to make sure their children’s needs were met. Moreover, outside of these specific incidents, both felt the schools were responsive to them and overall had positive views of their relationship with the schools.

The three women in the under $50,000 bracket had mixed experiences, but overall, these women had significantly more trouble *Being Heard*. Each told stories similar to those of Nicole and Shannon above, however, these mothers were dismissed more broadly and had fewer
resources with which address their concerns. Angela described mixed experiences with *Being Heard*. At her son’s first school, the administrators did not understand the magnitude of her son’s issues which included depression, self-harm and drug use. Furthermore, although not “the leader” of the misbehaving boys, her son received different punishments. He received out-of-school suspensions while his White friends received in-school suspensions. He ate lunch in the office while his peers, equally culpable, ate in the cafeteria. When Angela asked for an explanation, they did not provide one and accused her of “taking the defensive.” When she heard from other students that they believed the discipline was unfair, she began to wonder, “is it because they’re White and my son is a little bit darker?” Like Angela, Emily’s sons were also treated differently from their peers and like Angela, Emily inferred racial bias. She described picking her boys up from elementary school and “they were sitting in the front office with this secretary. She had a very stern look on her face. I asked, ‘why are they sitting here?’ ‘They’re always causing trouble’, and I was like ‘since when!’”

Angela moved her son from his vocational school and into the district high school where she had the opposite experience. She described the warmth and sense of community she felt. “Everybody just surrounded me, it was like ‘you’re going to be ok, we’re going to help you.’” She described her experiences with her daughter’s elementary school in similar, overwhelmingly positive terms. That said, Angela observed that “when I’m nice, I kinda feel like I get brushed off a bit. So I’m like no, let’s not be nice this time.” Getting angry when needed has become a useful strategy for *Being Heard.*

Like Shannon, Emily also disagreed with the school about her son’s learning needs. In Emily’s case, both she and the school agreed that her son needed support. However, the special educators at her son’s school “were just insisting that he was being stubborn and difficult. They
were like, ‘oh, he’s just a troublemaker.” Emily disagreed with this characterization. She pulled her son out of school and enrolled him in the state’s online accredited public school. She also researched and engaged community supports and eventually, he was diagnosed with ADHD. Emily returned to the school with her son’s team, and this time, the principal and special education liaison listened and accepted that her son’s behavior was due to ADHD rather than deliberate, poor behavior. This process took more than 6 months. She said “if I were a different parent, with a White child, from a wealthy family with two parents – it never would have happened.”

Table 4.8

*Being Heard- Categories, Subcategories and Example Quotes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being Heard</td>
<td>Seamless</td>
<td>“I simply had to raise my hand and say I’m interested and then show up.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manageable</td>
<td>“Just let me do this.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td>“I was asking to meet with the teachers and they declined.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Parental resources and equity.** In this study, all parents used strategies to bridge areas of disconnect between their view of education, their concerns, and what the school provided. However, not all parents’ viewpoints were heard and the strategies they used to make their points varied by socioeconomic status. Ryan and Dan, both White men, did not discuss how to be heard, in part because they were both already involved and contributing their ideas to the schools. Nicole and Shannon, both White women, expressed generally good relationships with the schools, but when each disagreed with the conclusions of the teachers, principals and others, they used their wealth and their education to navigate and solve the issues. Lastly, Angela, Emily, and Ada had the most difficulty being heard. Although some situations were parallel to
those experienced by their peers with higher incomes, they employed their strategies with greater forethought. Their children’s issues were serious learning and mental health issues with an overlay of racism. These issues typically took more time and more energy to address.

Accordingly, the strategies parents used to bridge these gaps varied by socioeconomic level. Parents earning more than $150,000 had the money to purchase help in securing the best education for their children. One parent moved her daughter into a private school and another was exploring this option. Parents in this income category could also purchase help in the form of special education specialists, tutors, supplemental educational programs such as RSM, sports clinics, camps, and more. These parents also had the social standing to argue with teachers and principals, the job flexibility to join school committees, and the time and energy to track and supplement a child’s academic progress. Table 4.9 illustrates the intersection of socioeconomic status and the types of strategies parents adopt to manage their relationship with their children’s schools in order to meet their children’s perceived needs.

On the other hand, parents earning under $50,000 could not participate at the same level. Tutoring and supplemental educational programs were not financially feasible. Instead, they cultivated relationships through contact with the school staff. They weighed decisions based on their child’s needs and what the school would reasonably accept. They used judicious anger to get their point across and to help the school staff understand the significance of the problem. Angela and Emily even pulled their children from school.
Table 4.9

Parent Strategies to Manage the Family-School Relationship by Socioeconomic Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$150,000 and over</th>
<th>Under $50,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental Educational Programs</td>
<td>Doing a program to be seen as a competent parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joining committees</td>
<td>Cultivating relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguing with staff about programming</td>
<td>Assume problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private schools</td>
<td>Using anger tactically</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

Chapter Four presented an analysis of the participant data, including a descriptive analysis and t-test of the quantitative survey data. The survey is a standard survey used by school districts across the country to gauge parent engagement and focused on responses from towns with high median incomes and local housing authorities. This chapter also described the qualitative analysis of seven participant interviews, representing four earning more than $150,000 and three earning less than $150,000. In the chapter that follows, conclusions, interpretations, limitations and areas for further research are presented.
Chapter Five

Introduction

This mixed-methods research project sought to explore potential differences in perception of schools as differentiated by the parent’s reported socioeconomic status. In this chapter, I draw five conclusions. Three conclusions correspond with the detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis in presented in Chapter Four, and two offer consideration for future research into the family-school relationship.

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to explore whether parents’ perceptions of their relationships with their children’s schools varied by income in communities with a median household income of $150,000 per year or higher. This project used Standpoint Theory (Harding, 2005) as a framework within which to consider the family-school relationships in specific communities. “Studying up, down and sideways” asks the same questions of different groups to illuminate a broader set of perspectives (Nader, 1972, p. 248). Therefore, this study examined parents’ perceptions of, and experiences with, public schools, and paid attention to areas of similarity and difference across socioeconomic backgrounds. The geographical setting was suburban communities with a median household income of $150,000 per year.

Chapter Five describes the results and findings of the study, discusses the integration of the quantitative and qualitative sections, and connects to existing literature on family engagement. This chapter concludes with an outline of study limitations, future recommendations, areas for future research, and a reflective summary.
Quantitative Research

The quantitative hypothesis of this study was: Parents’ perceptions of their relationship with their children’s’ schools in communities with above median incomes will vary by socioeconomic status. The specific sub-questions (SQ) for this phase were:

SQ1. Does socioeconomic status influence perceptions of engagement among parents in high-income public schools?

SQ2. How do parents’ perceptions vary among different socioeconomic backgrounds?

SQ3. In which areas of engagement do similarities and differences exist?

The survey data uncovered possible significant results in three of the individual survey questions. However, seven of the survey questions showed no significant result. Likewise, the clustered scores of the three categories, General Perception, School Fit, and School Climate, also showed no significant differences between those with incomes below and above $150,000. Lastly, the sum of all questions, Total Perception, did not indicate significant differences. A conservative interpretation of this data concludes that there is no difference between the two income groups.

There are several reasons why the quantitative data may not have shown significant results. First, parents, regardless of their socioeconomic position, may simply have similar perceptions of their children’s schools. The insignificant results may accurately reflect that parents are more alike in their perceptions than expected. Second, although the Survey Monkey K-12 Parent Survey was found to be valid and reliable, it remains possible that different parents interpreted questions in different ways. In Chapter Four, I discussed how the language of Question 12 (To what extent do you think children enjoy going to your child’s school?) differs slightly from the other questions in the survey because it asks parents to respond for “children” rather than for
their own child. Parents may have misunderstood Question 12 and possibly other questions, too.

Lastly, as discussed in Chapter Three, one value of a mixed-methods research design is that combining quantitative and qualitative produces “a more complete understanding of a research problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). In this study, the survey responses masked differences among respondents. This will be described in greater detail later in this chapter.

**Qualitative Research Questions**

The qualitative research questions were written to complement the survey questions and provide a deeper understanding of the question under examination. The qualitative research question was: How do parents of children in a high-income public-school system describe their relationship with the school? The specific sub-questions for the qualitative phase were:

- **SQa** To what do they attribute their experiences? (positive, negative, neutral?)
- **SQb** Do their perceptions vary by socioeconomic status?

The theory of how family socioeconomic status interacts with perceptions of the family-school relationship consisted of three primary findings: (a) parent perceptions of the purpose of education varies, (b) the family-school relationship is often viewed through the lens of parental educational concerns, which sometimes differ by family income, (c) parent strategies for realizing their educational goals vary by socioeconomic status. This study also revealed two further findings: (d) surveys used on their own may not appropriately capture the nuance of socioeconomic differences, and (e) Standpoint Theory may be a useful framework to understand how family engagement policies and programs may reflect a dominant American educational narrative. Some of these conclusions relate primarily to how families related to schools while others focus on how schools listen to, work with, and build programs for families. All conclusions listed above have the potential to improve family-school relationships.
For each participant of this study, including many who completed the survey, each of the first three themes were evident. These themes are not static, but dynamic. Parental perspectives changed and shifted over time and through parenting experiences. Nor do these themes fit every parent perfectly. Trends in perceptions of the family-school relationship generally aligned with the two socioeconomic categories, but parenting and education, are complex and nuanced endeavors. Parents hold multiple views in more than one category. The following section outlines each conclusion.

Mixed-Methods Integration

Plano Clark (2019) states that integration of qualitative and quantitative data is a critical part of mixed-methods research. As noted in Chapter Three, she offers four questions regarding integration: a) why integrate? b) what to integrate? c) when to integrate? and d) how to integrate? This research project integrated quantitative and qualitative data so the results provide a “comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation” (Leavy, 2017, p. 9). In this study, the quantitative results, which were largely inconclusive, were integrated with the themes emerging from the qualitative portion through comparison, after both portions were completed and analyzed.

Finally, Plano Clark’s (2019) last question asks how the data will be integrated. The qualitative and quantitative data were compared and found not to align. The quantitative results were inconclusive while the qualitative results demonstrated differences between income groups. These discrepancies raise interesting questions that will be explored later in this chapter.

Conclusions

Research is clear that most parents want the best for their children and most parents want to be involved in their children’s education (Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Becker, 1982). This project
found these ideas to hold true. All interviewees voiced a deep love of their children and each clearly valued education as an integral part of their children’s life and future. And, as Irwin and Elley (2011) assert, “parents revealed quite profound moral perspectives on parenting” (p. 485).

This is reflected in both the quantitative and qualitative sections of this research projects. The survey included open-ended questions in which parents shared their hopes and concerns, including in-depth comments about their children’s challenges, strengths and needs. For example, one respondent wrote “my child hates school, most children at his school probably enjoy it” and another stated, “my son feels safe and accepted.”

Similarly, each interviewee had clearly spent time thinking about what, precisely, their children needed from schools and how they might achieve these goals. Shannon reflected that she “was paying more attention than [the teachers] were” and Angela shared that “with my daughter, if they’re reading a book, I read the same book. So, we can be reading the same book – I love reading!” The participants in this study back up family-engagement tenets – these parents care deeply about their children’s education.

**Conclusion One – Surveys alone cannot provide a full picture of parental perceptions of the family-school relationship**

If I had conducted only the quantitative part of this study, I would have reported that a family’s socioeconomic status does not influence their perceptions of their child’s school. Including the qualitative data did, therefore, provide vital insights. The difference in results between the two parts of this study may be due to natural drawbacks of survey data. For example, survey question three asks, *how confident are you in your ability to make sure your child's school meets your child's learning needs?* In this survey, differences between parents in the above $150,000 category were not statistically different from those in the below $150,000 category. Both groups lacked confidence at similar rates (Figure 5.1). About 20% of those
claiming incomes of $150,000 lacked confidence in their child’s school. Among those with incomes under $150,000, 18% lacked confidence. Surveys can assess a lack of confidence in a school, but parents may root their lack of confidence in very different places.

Surveys do not capture why approximately one-fifth of parents have low confidence in their child’s school. The qualitative data added texture to this question. The study indicates that some parents lacked confidence because they were unsure if their child would be able to survive in a competitive world. Other parents lacked confidence because their child’s school experiences were marred by racism or bullying. Understanding that these distinctions exist is a first step in improving the family-school relationship. Capturing detailed information about these distinctions in any particular community is a critical second step. Therefore, the use of survey tools does not necessarily capture the most important aspects of parental perceptions.
Conclusion Two - Socioeconomic Status Matters

The qualitative portion of this study agrees with the literature that socioeconomic factors influence family engagement with schools (Cheadle & Amato, 2011; Dumais et al., 2012; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Robinson & Harris, 2014). In particular, the parental perception regarding the purpose of school aligns with Lareau’s (2003) theory of concerted cultivation. “Concerted cultivation” is “… the idea that educational and financial resources” of the parents with financial resources leads to different styles of parenting (Dumais et al., 2012). Parents with greater resources use their knowledge, money, and connections to create tailored educational experiences for their children. The families in this study who earned above the area

Figure 5.1

*How confident are you in your ability to make sure your child’s school meets your child’s learning needs?*
median embrace Lareau’s concerted cultivation to varying degrees. These included using supplemental educational programs like RSM to boost their children up the educational ladder. In fact, Nicole reports that parents in her community spend, on average, $7,000 per year on out-of-school activities for each child. Likewise, “other parents” seek ADHD diagnoses to win their child extra time on standardized tests. These tactics qualify as concerted cultivation.

Lareau (2011) also found that parents she designated as working class, favored a parenting approach she called, The Accomplishment of Natural Growth. This approach is less structured than concerted cultivation. In it, children have freedom and time to pursue their own activities. This research study diverges from Lareau’s framework on this point. Parents earning under $50,000 in this study still had time, energy, and abundant ideas about what their child needed from school. However, they did not share the same educational values as their peers with greater financial resources. Unlike Lareau’s study, these parents viewed education as a way to develop a balanced adult.

Additionally, the ideas of Education as a Ladder and Future Concerns exemplify a belief in parent and infant determinism as discussed in Chapter One. The categories of Being Better Than and Straight A’s pull from the idea of infant determinism, which proclaims that how a child develops informs the success of the future adult (Füredi, 2001). In this belief system, variance from accepted practices can irreparably harm a child, who will therefore not be successful. Its flip-side is parental determinism, which asserts that every action a parent takes reverberates into adulthood either for better or worse.

On the other side, parents in the lower income category cited current issues their children faced each day in school. These issues were significant, encompassing mental health concerns, racial intolerance and long-term bullying. Mental health problems in communities with higher
Incomes are well documented (Ciciolla, Curlee, et al., 2017; Luthar et al., 2013). However, the mental health issues described in this study did not necessarily connect to the high-pressure environment described in the literature.

The negative impact racial issues have in society and schooling are also well documented (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Rothstein, 2004; Shapiro, 2004). Family experiences in this project validated this research. Families were impacted by negative teacher and administrator beliefs about the racial and ethnic backgrounds of their families determines, and these biases resulted in a negative view (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013).

**Conclusion 3 - Intensive Parenting Creates A Petri Dish for Stress**

Parents in the higher income category are more likely to see *Education as a Ladder* and to see the family-school relationship through the lens of future concerns. Their behaviors match the literature on “intensive parenting”, which encompasses a range of parenting titles discussed in Chapter Two: tiger mother, helicopter parent, concerted cultivation, child as project, professional mothers, preparation H, paranoid parenting, parenting out of control and carpenter, rather than gardener. Intensive parenting includes a palpable anxiety evinced by some parents in the higher income tier of this study (Cooper, 2014; LeVine & LeVine, 2016; Nelson, 2010; Stearns, 2003; Villalobos, 2014). In this study, anxiety serves as motivation to maximize education. This sentiment is captured in the quote “I can, I must, achieve: strive for the top, to attain what my parents achieved. This is central, imperative life goal; nothing else is important. Without success, I will be left behind as a failure, as others soar to great heights” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 15).

However, this study suggests that the intensive parenting anxiety encapsulated by the quote above has impact beyond the immediate family. Ada, Emily, and Angela implicate “other
parents" in the challenges their children face in school. In particular, the high-pressure, intensive focus on grades, colleges, and acceleration supersedes all other considerations, potentially allowing racism, religious intolerance and bullying to flourish. Nicole agrees, noting that “other parents” influence everyone. Intensive parenting creates an environment in which stress spreads like a contagion.

**Conclusion Four - Standpoint Theory and Power Relationships**

Michelle Fine (1993) points out that family engagement is not a “power-neutral” partnership” (p. 682). She argues that there are substantial “questions of power, authority, and control must be addressed head-on” (p. 683). Likewise, Lisa Delpit (1995) says “to act as if power does not exist is to ensure that the power status quo remains the same” (p. 39). These ideas are visible in this research.

Studying the perceptions of parents on both ends of the income continuum unveiled complex power relationships in these school systems. Certainly, educators think about their position of power in relation to their students and their student’s families. This study, however, revealed other power dynamics that also influence a family’s perception of school. Traditionally, researchers think about how teachers and administrators have power over families, as was the case with Emily and Ada.

However, in this study, some parents wielded power over the schools in form of public and vocal pressure towards a goal or through the use of outside specialists and testing. Furthermore, this study also exposed power imbalances among families. For example, accelerated math classes were linked to a family’s ability to pay for outside classes and to a child’s race. Also, some families were seemingly unaware of the bullying behavior of their own children. Family engagement with schools is complex and dynamic. There are multiple power relationships within schools, and all are uneven in a variety of ways. As Fine (1993) posits, “questions of power,
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“authority, and control” need to be primary considerations when working in communities such as those in this study (p. 683).

Conclusion Five – Obstacles to Equitable Schooling

Taken in order, conclusions one through three tell a story. Parents in the communities studied had different views of the role of education, different ideas about what constitutes an educational problem, and different probabilities of being heard by the school. Family income appears to be an important aspect in each. Thus, socioeconomic background may have three critical impacts: first, it operates invisibly. Many districts survey parent experiences with schools, however, surveys obscure important nuances beneath parent responses. Districts may miss important pieces of information and make one-sided policy decisions. Second, if socioeconomic status is invisible to a school system, the impact of family income can proceed unchecked. Some parents will double-down on traditional academics while others will opt out. In the target communities of this study, this may result in a contagion of stress influencing everyone in the school community, not only the families embracing an intensive parenting approach. Third, power imbalances among schools and families, families and other families, and among students will persist.

When schools focus policies only on parents from non-dominant and underserved groups, they ignore the role that parents in the dominant culture play in shaping educational inequity. Power differences among these families cannot be separated from the family-school relationship because parental status shapes not only the relationship between the parents and their children’s schools, but also among parents within a community. The categories of Being Heard and Current vs Future Concerns provide examples (see Chapter Four). At the heart of this study are issues of equity in public schools and each conclusion presented in this chapter represents one more obstacle to equitable education.
Implications for Future Practice

This section provides three suggestions for school staff and administrators working in districts similar to those in this study.

Suggestion One: Supplement Surveys with Qualitative Data

Surveys of parents from a wide range of socioeconomic background may obscure differences among groups. As discussed earlier, parents may report a lack of confidence in their child’s school, but their areas of concern may stem from different places. Without looking more deeply, policies developed from the survey results may inadvertently marginalize some parents and students. Strategies to address this problem include:

- Recognizing that socioeconomic background matters in the family-school relationship.
- Understanding that parents with different backgrounds (including socioeconomic) may have different ideas about the purpose of education. These cannot necessarily be captured by a survey.
- Using focus groups, interviews, or meetings to explore the survey data in-depth.
- Developing an awareness of how specific problems within schools have different types of impact on families.

Suggestion Two - Ask Common Sense Questions in Reverse

“Asking common sense questions in reverse” (Nader, 1972, p. 5) is one way for school staff to uncover power differences among those invested in schools. Districts can adopt this practice for use in multiple areas including policy development, curriculum adoption and implementation, and family-school relationships. Flipping one’s perspective of common problem may offer a new solution (Table 5.1).
Table 5.1

Examples of Common Sense Questions and Their Reverse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Sense Questions</th>
<th>In Reverse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How can schools encourage families to support their children?</td>
<td>What can families teach schools about their children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can students in schools in communities with median incomes lower than average have the same success as students in communities with above median incomes?</td>
<td>Are the success of communities with above median incomes due to schooling? To parenting? To something else?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Suggestion Three: Equity Requires Community Awareness and Commitment

In this study, Ada, Emily, Nicole, and Shannon described ways in which the broader school environment impacted all children. Their observations suggest that the family-school relationship is not an individual, self-contained relationship. Instead, family perceptions about education and about their relationship with their children’s schools are dynamic and mutually influential. In the communities in this study, unrealistic parental expectations are viewed as a catalyst. These expectations behave like a contagion, moving from individual families into the greater school community and creating high levels of stress. Some parents in this study observe that unrealistic expectations are pushing schools away from Education for Personhood and toward Education As Ladder.

The family engagement models outlined in Chapter Two typically view the family-school relationship as an individual endeavor. Families connect and work with teachers and staff members in support of their own children. However, this study suggests that family engagement cannot be defined as merely the relationship between one family and their children’s schools. Likewise, viewing family engagement as the relationship between one specific subset of families and schools is also not sufficient. Instead, family engagement can be seen broadly as the
relationships among all members of a school community, not only between parents and teachers, but also among families in a district.

Below, I adapted Epstein’s (2011) *Overlapping Spheres of Influence* to illustrate the interaction among the families in this study and their children’s schools. In Figure 5.2, the school community is represented by the orange circle. The school overlaps with both income groups in this study, although not equally. The blue circle denotes parents in over $150,000 income category and the green circle signifies parents in below $50,000 income category. In this study, parents in the $150,000 and above income group were more likely to view *Education As a Ladder*, to see education as a path to addressing *Future Concerns*, and they were more likely to *Be Heard* and to have resources and strategies to support their views. To represent these findings, the blue circle is bigger and overlaps with school more so than does the green sphere.

The parents in the $50,000 and under income group believed in *Education for Personhood*. They and their students faced serious *Current Concerns*, they were less likely to *Be Heard* and they had fewer resources with which to addresses these issues. Their sphere is smaller, indicating their undersized impact on the school system. They also overlap less. Unlike Epstein’s depiction of the family-school relationship in which each sphere has equal power to influence a child, these spheres are not equal.

This figure characterizes the uneven influence the parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds have in their family-school relationships.
When parents in the higher income group push, the system shifts and desires of one group are prioritized over others. The goal of equitable education would be for the figure above to achieve balance, for both spheres to have the ability to have their concerns and their views of education heard and accepted.

“Other parents” in this study symbolized the mythical, poorly behaved, overinvolved, intensive parent. Interviewees invoked the “other parent” as a foil for their own behavior. However, focusing on the behavior of “other parents” may mask the ways in which the typical parent has an impact on equity. For example, intensive parenting has a direct impact on equity by providing some children with extra academic coaching, by prioritizing academic development above social development, and contributing to an atmosphere of high pressure at schools.

Schools addressing equity issues must bring awareness to all community members. In this way,
the school community can develop understanding of how their educational choices might be increasing inequity in schools. Strategies include:

- Reframing education as a community priority instead of focusing only on the needs of the individual child.
- Demystifying common educational myths which cause parental anxiety and promote intensive parenting.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Suggestions for future research fall into three conceptual categories: equity, diversity, and student outcomes. Questions of equity pervade this study. Foremost are questions about how parents with greater resources might impact educational systems. Do families with higher incomes influence district curriculum and policy? If so, how? Do parents favoring *Education As Ladder* make equity harder to achieve?

Future research could examine the questions above in the broader context of local, state and federal policy, beginning with a literature review of how parent advocacy sways educational policy at a local level. Next, a study of one community could reveal areas in which intensive parenting practices pressure teachers, administrators, and school boards into specific choices. Anecdotal evidence of this trend exists. In one target town, a school committee member abstained from approving the new accelerated math curriculum because they believed it emerged from pressure applied by parents who spent money on private mathematics programming and tutoring. Finally, as the United States grapples with issues of equity, especially in schooling, the themes unveiled in this study may provide a framework from which to explore the ways in which inequity in the family-school relationship is rendered invisible to school staff and administration and also to students and their families.
Diversity

This study lacked diversity of participants in two critical areas - race and income under $50,000. A broader group of participants is critical to future research, especially because race, income, and inequity are intertwined. In order to make change, the role each plays in school equity problems needs to be explored in-depth.

Additionally, many survey respondents and several interviewees referenced the impact that a special education diagnosis had on their relationship with the school. This study did not account for special education and future research should examine this as an important component in the family-school relationship in high-income communities. This study raised several important questions about diversity:

- What are the experiences of families from different socioeconomic backgrounds with the special education process in schools in communities with high median incomes?
- What similarities and/or differences exist across race and income, and how do families understand their attribute their experiences (positive, negative, or neutral)?
- Does a family’s income influence the quality of their child’s special education intervention? If yes, in which ways?

Standpoint Theory

Understanding a school system’s context is important when designing policies and programs for families. Therefore, “studying up” remains critical because doing so may lay bare assumptions about families and education. Future research in this area could follow a similar research design as that for this study but increase both qualitative and qualitative respondents.
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Moreover, given that parenting ideology differs not only by socioeconomic status, but also regionally, running similar studies in other areas of the United States with similar populations to this study might provide further nuance.

Likewise, a mixed-methods study could be developed to understand how parental perceptions in private schools might be similar to, or different from those in public schools in communities with incomes above the state average. Such a study might also explore how parents from different income levels experience their relationship with a private school. Similarly, the number of parents homeschooling or provide other alternative forms of education for their children are increasing. Studying their reasons for these choices and their perceptions of the purpose of education might provide insight into issues of wealth and equity in the family-school relationship.

**Student Outcomes**

Lastly, further research into student outcomes is also necessary. Li (2018) suggested that the intensive parenting behaviors described in research and in this study have a tipping point after which they cause harm rather than benefit. Following the long-term trajectory of children whose families who use an intensive parenting style might provide information about the long-term impact of this parenting approach and could offer insight into the academic, social, emotional and life paths for children in families embracing *Education As Ladder* approach.

**Final Thoughts**

The results of this study suggested three primary themes relating to the family-school relationship: (a) parent perceptions of the purpose of education vary, (b) the family-school relationship is often viewed through the lens of parental educational concerns, which vary by family income, and (c) parent strategies for realizing their educational goals vary by
socioeconomic status. This study also revealed two further findings: (d) surveys alone may not appropriately capture the nuance of socioeconomic differences underlying parent perceptions of their relationship with schools, and (e) Sandra Harding’s (2005) Standpoint Theory may be a useful framework to understand how family engagement policies and programs may reflect a dominant educational narrative.

Parents in this study had different ideas regarding the purpose of education. While not uniform, parents in the higher income group tended to see Education as a Ladder to future success. These parents valued traditional symbols of education which are visible markers of success in their communities. These included Straight A’s, accelerated classes – especially accelerated mathematics - and prestigious, well-known colleges. Parents in the lower economic category saw education more broadly. Academics were one part of a larger picture which prioritized balance, love of learning and good mental health. It’s important to reiterate that the parents who view Education As Ladder, may also prioritize these elements, but not in their relationship with school.

Parents also shared different concerns about schooling and education. Parents in the higher income group were more likely to cite possible future problems as their motivation. The future economy, a view of extreme competition, and the scarcity of resources drove the parents in the $150,000 and above category to address future obstacles through current educational practices. On the other hand, those earning less than $50,000 had serious and immediate problems with which to contend. These included mental health issues, racism, intolerance, and bullying.

All parents used strategies to navigate the family-school relationship and, unsurprisingly, these strategies aligned with a family’s available resources. Parents with the means to do so used outside educational supports ranging from tutoring, to workbooks, to specialty programs like
Kumon and RSM. They felt comfortable joining school and district governance committees and arguing with administrators in order to achieve their goals. Lastly, all interviewees in the above $150,000 category noted a positive, either seamless or manageable relationship with their children’s schools. Parents with lower incomes did not experience manageable relationship with the schools. Instead, they employed specific strategies to balance their relationships including; cultivating relationships with staff, being kind when warranted, and being judiciously angry when important issues occurred. These mothers were also persistent, eloquent, and crystal clear in defining their needs. Lastly, they actively and deliberately decided when to “give in” and accept the school’s suggestion and when to stand firm and fight.

Lastly, this study offered two considerations for research into the family-school relationship. The first is to consider that surveys may not accurately capture important relational elements. As described above, families may lack confidence in schools at similar rates, but their reasons why are fundamentally different. Likewise, using Harding’s (2005) standpoint theory to “study up, down and sideways” may be a useful path to consider intra-district trends including similarities and differences among families which may relate to issues of equity.

In 1972, Nader (1972) pointed out that anthropologic research “studied down”. She argued that when researchers only “study down”, research leads to one-sided policy solutions. Equally important, Nader argues, is “studying up and sideways”. Doing so allows researchers to ask “common sense questions in reverse. This study attempted to study up, down and sideways as suggested by Nader. And found that some of the conclusions in family engagement research may be more nuanced than is evident on the surface. Of particular note are the differences in parental perceptions of problems. I’m struck by the current problems faced by parents earning under $50,000. I’m equally struck by the fact that the two mothers in the higher income category were
able to solve their similar serious problems relatively quickly, while two of three mothers earning less than $50,000 experienced multiple unsuccessful attempts to meet their students’ needs. While the school administrators were open and receptive in one case, the problem persisted unrelentingly for two full school years.

The results of this study suggested that despite potential superficial similarities, the experiences of parents and children vary significantly by income and these differences potentially impact equity within districts. Until we “study up, down and sideways” at federal, state and local levels, we will not be able to address the pressing problems of inequity inherent in the American school system.
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C%20such%20as%20%E2%80%9CAmerican%20Indian%E2%80%9D%20and%20%E2%80%9CWhite.%E2%80%9D


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Appendix A

Glossary of Key Terms

**Family** – In this study, family is defined as two or more people living together and related by marriage, birth, or adoption.

**Parent** – Parent is shorthand to describe all types of primary caregivers including but not limited to legal guardians, aunts and uncles, and grandparents.

**Race and Ethnicity**

Terms for race and ethnicity in this study use the same definitions as the U.S. Census Bureau as described on the Census (2018) webpage titled About. The Census Bureau states that “the racial categories included in the census questionnaire generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

**Race**

**American Indian or Alaska Native** - “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.”

**Asian** – “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.”

**Black or African American** – “A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.”

**Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander** – “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.”

**White** – “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.”

**Two or More Races** – multi-racial residents of the United States.

**Ethnicity**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, “ethnicity determines whether a person is of Hispanic origin or not. For this reason, ethnicity is broken out in two categories, Hispanic or Latino and Not Hispanic or Latino. Hispanics may report as any race” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

**Socioeconomic Terms**

Terms describing income and social class can have multiple definitions and also carry specification connotations which may shift the reader’s understanding of this study. Key socioeconomic terms are defined below in order to clarify their meanings.
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High-income – Lareau (2018) refers to school districts with this economic profile as “elite” which she defines as “districts in which the majority of residents are affluent, creating an ample tax base from which to fund high-quality public schools.” In this study, I refer to these communities as having high-incomes. Like Lareau, the typical resident of this community has abundant resources and their self-reported incomes are approximately double the state average income.

Low-income - In this study, low-income is defined as one third or less of the community’s average income, or $50,000. This amount of income is above the 2019 federal poverty threshold of $25,750 for a family of four but significantly below the living wage for this county which is projected to approximately $90,000 (MIT, n.d.).

Poor – the U.S. Census Bureau defines poor as earning below the poverty threshold of $25,750 for a family of four (Bureau, 2019)

Socioeconomic Status or Background – In this study, socioeconomic status and background are used interchangeably to describe a family’s income level.

Working-class, Middle-class and Upper Middle-Class – these sociological terms do not have common definitions and are not defined by or used by the U.S. Census Bureau. Therefore, this study will only use these terms when discussing research which utilizes these terms (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In general, middle-class refers to those who earn income on either side of the median household income and lower-class refers to those earning less than the median income, but are not poor.
Appendix B

Survey Questions

I am a doctoral student at Lesley University and this study is part of my dissertation looking at the family-school relationships. In this survey, I am interested in learning more about your thoughts, feelings, and attitudes towards your child's school.

When answering these questions, please consider your child's current experience at school.

This survey is to help us understand different aspects of the parent/school relationship. Your answers will be used in aggregate, and I will not be evaluating individual responses. As such, please be as honest as possible - there are no right or wrong answers.

Because different children often have different experiences in the same school, please complete this survey once per child.

1. In which city/town does your child attend school?
2. What grade is your child in?

In this first section, I'd like to learn more about some of your roles, beliefs, and attitudes as well as some of the activities that you do as the parent of a school-aged child.

3. How confident are you in your ability to make sure your child's school meets your child's learning needs?
   - Not confident at all
   - Slightly confident
   - Somewhat confident
   - Quite confident
   - Extremely confident

4. In the past year, how often have you visited your child's school?
   - Almost never
   - Once or twice
   - Every few months
   - Monthly
   - Weekly or more

5. To what extent do you know how your child is doing socially at school?
   - Not at all
   - A little bit
   - Somewhat
   - Quite a bit
   - A tremendous amount

6. Do you have any comments about any of your answers to the questions in this section?
In this section, I'd like to learn more about your perceptions of your child and your child's interactions with his/her school.

7. How well do the teaching styles of your child's teachers match your child's learning style?
   Not well at all
   Mildly well
   Fairly well
   Quite well
   Extremely well

8. At your child's school, how well does the overall approach to discipline work for your child?
   Not well at all
   Mildly well
   Fairly well
   Quite well
   Extremely well

9. How much of a sense of belonging does your child feel at his or her school?
   No belonging at all
   A little bit of belonging
   Some belonging
   Quite a bit of belonging
   A tremendous amount of belonging

10. How well do you feel your child's school is preparing him or her for his or her next academic year?
    Not well at all
    Mildly well
    Fairly well
    Quite well
    Extremely well

11. Do you have any comments about any of your answers to the questions in this section?

In this section, I'd like to learn more about your perceptions of the overall climate at your child's school.

12. To what extent do you think that children enjoy going to your child's school?
    Not at all
    A little bit
    Somewhat
    Quite a bit
    A tremendous amount

13. How much does the school value diversity of children's backgrounds?
    Not at all
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A little bit
Some
Quite a bit
A tremendous amount

14. Overall, how much respect do you think the teachers at your child's school have for the children?
Almost no respect
A little bit of respect
Some respect
Quite a bit of respect
A tremendous amount of respect

15. Do you have any comments about any of your answers to the questions in this section?

I would like to know more about you. Please take a few moments to answer the following questions.
16. What is your gender?
Female
Male
Other

17. What is your child's gender?
Female
Male
Other

18. What is your relationship to your child?
Mother
Father
Step-mother
Step-father
Grandmother
Grandfather
Aunt
Uncle
Guardian
Other

19. Which race/ethnicity best describes your child? (Please choose only one.)
American Indian or Alaskan Native
Asian / Pacific Islander
Black or African American
Hispanic American
White / Caucasian
Multiple ethnicity / Other (please specify)

20. What is your approximate average household income?
   $0-$24,999
   $25,000-$49,999
   $50,000-$74,999
   $75,000-$99,999
   $100,000-$124,999
   $125,000-$149,999
   $150,000-$174,999
   $175,000-$199,999
   $200,000 and up

21. Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?
22. Would you like to volunteer to be interviewed as part of this study? Please share your name and email.
Appendix C
Survey Protocol

Informed Consent SURVEY

You are invited to participate in a research project titled *Family Engagement and Socioeconomic Background in Affluent Suburban Schools.* The intent of this research study is to identify the strengths and limitations within the school-family relationship to identify implications for future training, research and practice. Your participation will entail participating in an online questionnaire consisting of ?? questions and taking no longer than ?? minutes.

- No specific knowledge is necessary.
- Participation is strictly anonymous.
- You are free to choose not to participate.
- You may end your participation at anytime by quitting the survey.
- No identifying details will be collected by the researcher.
- If any problems arise with regards to this research, contact the researcher Liz Lee at elee15@lesley.edu.
Appendix D

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me your name and the names and grades of your child/children

2. What school do he/she/they attend?
   a. In which town/city?
   b. How long have they attended this school?

3. Tell me about your child/children?
   a. Prompts – what do they like? Dislike?
   b. What are your goals for your child?

As you know, I'm interested in the family-school relationship.

4. Are you satisfied with your child/children’s experiences at X school? Are your goals being met? Why or why not?

5. Does the school value your input about your child/children’s education?

6. In what ways, if any, does school X encourage you to be involved in your child/children’s education?

7. How do teachers want families to be involved in schooling (at your child/children’s school)?

8. How do families want to be involved?
   a. Probing areas of similarity/divergence

9. To what extent, if any, do you think that teachers have opinions about the way a parent raises their children?

10. Does the way a parent raises a child have an impact on education? If so, how. If not, why not?

11. Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?
Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Thank you for meeting with me today. As you know, I’m a doctoral student in Lesley University’s Ph.D. program and am working on my dissertation focusing on the family-school relationship. Specifically, I am exploring how families with different income levels experience their relationship with their child[ren]’s public school located in communities with high average income levels. The purpose is to examine similarities and/or differences among families. This interview is part of my dissertation. Your participation in this interview may provide benefit to families and schools by providing feedback about what does and does not work in the family-school relationship. Schools can then improve their programming.

Before the interview begins, I’d like to review this consent form. This interview is completely voluntary. You can decide to end the interview at any time and you can refuse to answer any question. There is no penalty if you chose not to answer a question and no penalty if you end the interview. My job is to protect your privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. I will do this by giving you and your child pseudonyms, and by obscuring identifying features including location of your child’s school, your home, your occupation, and any other distinguishing characteristics. After we finish, I will store both the recording and notes in a locked box, to be destroyed 5 years after this study is completed. All data on my computer is double password protected. You are welcome to receive a transcript of our conversation if you would like. [Go over form] Do you have any questions about consent? [Sign Consent]

After I finish interviewing, I will analyze these conversations alongside the survey data I collected and identify themes which will become part of my dissertation. Your words and thoughts will not be used in any other project without your further consent.

If you were to reveal somethings which Federal or State law requires me to report, such as someone harmed or child neglect, I am obligated to do so. Applicable laws take precedence over
confidentiality.

As we talk, please let me know if you feel uncomfortable or wish to end the interview, for any reason. You are free to withdraw from this study at any point without question. You can also ask that I stop taking notes and/or turn off the recorder at any point.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

I would like to tape this interview for purposes of note taking. Do I have your permission to do so? [Turn on recorder]
Appendix F

Interview Consent Form

Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in the research project titled **Family Engagement and Socioeconomic Background in Affluent Suburban Schools**. The intent of this research study is to explore the relationship between parents/guardians and their child’s school in towns with primarily families from high-income backgrounds.

Your participation will entail one interview lasting approximately one hour, possibly one email of clarifying questions, and a transcript to review for accuracy.

In addition:

- You are free to choose not to participate in the research and to discontinue your participation in the research at any time without facing negative consequences.
- Identifying details will be kept confidential by the researcher. Data collected will be coded with a pseudonym, the participant’s identity will never be revealed by the researcher, and only the researcher will have access to the data collected.
- Data will be destroyed after 5 years.
- Any and all of your questions will be answered at any time and you are free to consult with anyone (i.e., friend, family) about your decision to participate in the research and/or to discontinue your participation.
- Participation in this research poses the possibility of bringing up negative experiences with schools.
- If any problem in connection to the research arises, you can contact the researcher Elizabeth Lee at 510-301-6132 and by email at elee15@lesley.edu or Lesley University sponsoring faculty Dr. Lisa Fiore at 617-349-8662 or lfiore@lesley.edu.
- The researcher may present the outcomes of this study for academic purposes (i.e., articles, teaching, conference presentations, supervision etc.)

I am 18 years of age or older. My consent to participate has been given of my own free will and that I understand all that is stated above. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Researcher’s signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which*
complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairpersons at irb@lesley.edu
Appendix G

IRB Approval

DATE: June 17, 2019

To: Elizabeth Lee

From: Robyn Cruz and Ulas Kaplan, Co-Chairs, Lesley IRB

RE: IRB Number: 18/19-058

The application for the research project, “Studying Up, Down and Sideways: family-school relationships in affluent public schools by socioeconomic status” provides a detailed description of the recruitment of participants, the method of the proposed research, the protection of participants’ identities and the confidentiality of the data collected. The consent form is sufficient to ensure voluntary participation in the study and contains the appropriate contact information for the researcher and the IRB.

This application is approved for one calendar year from the date of approval.

You may conduct this project.

Date of approval of application: 6/17/19

Investigators shall immediately suspend an inquiry if they observe an adverse change in the health or behavior of a subject that may be attributable to the research. They shall promptly report the circumstances to the IRB. They shall not resume the use of human subjects without the approval of the IRB.