Family Engagement: The Perspectives of Low-Income Families on the Family Engagement Strategies of Urban Schools

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Abstract
The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of low-income families, including family engagement with their child’s urban school. Although urban schools attempt to implement family engagement strategies, the strategies are often found to be ineffective (Hill & Taylor, 2004; William & Sanchez, 2011). This study employed several techniques for the purpose of data collection including demographic profile questionnaires, an in-depth, semi-structured focus group interview containing six participants, and one semi-structured one-on-one interview. This study included seven participants obtained utilizing purposive sampling. The interview protocol was designed with open-ended questions aligned to attempt to explore the research questions guiding this study. This study yielded three major findings. The findings include: single mothers in urban communities hold a significant and critical understanding of their role in their child’s positive educational experience and identify several roles to support their children; despite their expressed and demonstrated willingness to be engaged in their child’s educational experience, urban families identified social factors such as single-parent households and a lack of job flexibility that impede their ability to fulfill that role; and family engagement strategies utilized by urban schools lack the flexibility of enriched learning opportunities for urban families. This study provides recommendations that may assist urban schools in enhancing their efforts to developing and implementing effective strategies for engaging families. First, conducting a family engagement needs assessment. Secondly, strengthening school and individual level cultural competence. Finally, establishing family learning communities that equip and empower families with enriched learning opportunities.

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Family Engagement: The Perspectives of Low-Income Families on the Family Engagement Strategies of Urban Schools

By

Don-Lee M. Applyrs

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Tara L. Winter

Committee Member

Dr. Paul Miller

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

May 2018
Dedication

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your path” (Proverbs 3:5-6). First, I give praise and honor to my God, and my Lord Jesus Christ, for the countless blessings of grace, favor, and strength granted throughout my life and this journey. I extend profound gratitude and appreciation to my lovely and supportive wife, Dorcey L. Applyrs, DrPH. I am truly honored to call you my life partner. You are my inspiration and my biggest cheerleader. Thank you Hun!

To my mother, Marie Denise Applyrs. I am deeply grateful for sacrifices you made throughout your life that have shaped the person I am today. To my siblings, Jennifer, Brian, Darley, and Kim; nieces and nephews, Ethan, Brianna, Ellis, and Jenna, I thank you for your love and support. I also extend my gratitude to my pastor, Dr. Damone P. Johnson, his wife, Angela Johnson, and my entire Metropolitan church family. Thank you for your consistent words of encouragement, check-ins, and prayers.

To Dr. Galen Gomes, I thank you for your friendship and introducing me to the Ed.D program. Iron sharpens iron! To my cousin and best friend, Dr. Sem Ganthier, I thank you for the reliable reminders to always “strive for greatness.” To my all doctoral friends at various institutions who labored alongside me, “we did it!”

I would like to thank my purple and gold family at the University at Albany for supporting me along the various stages of my journey. A special thank you to Mr. Dwight and Mrs. Rose Williams for always encouraging me to “keep the faith.”
To the faculty at St. John Fisher College, I appreciate your demonstrated genuine care and support to “trust the process.” Dr. C. Michael Robinson, thank you for this invaluable opportunity. You enabled me to see that this program was the right fit for me. To my dissertation chair, Dr. Tara L. Winter, and committee member, Dr. Paul Miller, thank you for you unwavering commitment and dedication to my process. You two challenged me in a manner that has enriched my academic, professional, and personal life.

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To the participants of this study, I am humbly grateful for your decision to share your experiences and personal stories with me. It is my hope that your stories will be the catalyst for improvement that best support the engagement needs of so many families.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank the KIPP: Tech Valley Charter School “Team and Family” for your support! Most especially, my current and alumni students for the privilege to be a part of your educational and life journeys. Let this be a testament that when you “work hard and be nice,” you can achieve anything.
Biographical Sketch

Don-Lee M. Applyrs, commonly known as Don, is a native of Brooklyn, NY, and the son of Haitian immigrant parents. Don-Lee is currently the Founding Associate School Leader at KIPP: Tech Valley Primary Charter School in Albany, NY. Mr. Applyrs attended the University at Albany earning a Bachelor of Science in Information Science and Policy in 2003. Mr. Applyrs remained at the University at Albany to earn a Master of Science in Information Science and Policy in 2006. Throughout his 12 years within education, Mr. Applyrs has served as a Middle School Library Media Specialist, basketball coach, Assistant Principal, and School Principal at KIPP: Tech Valley Charter Middle School in Albany, NY.

Mr. Applyrs began his doctoral studies in the Education Doctorate in Executive Leadership (Ed.D) program at St. John Fisher College in spring of 2015. Under the guidance of his dissertation chair, Dr. Tara L. Winter, and committee member, Dr. Paul Miller, Mr. Applyrs conducted a phenomenological qualitative study on the lived experiences of low-income families by examining their perspectives on family engagement in urban schools and received the Ed.D. degree in 2018.
Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of low-income families, including family engagement with their child’s urban school. Although urban schools attempt to implement family engagement strategies, the strategies are often found to be ineffective (Hill & Taylor, 2004; William & Sanchez, 2011).

This study employed several techniques for the purpose of data collection including demographic profile questionnaires, an in-depth, semi-structured focus group interview containing six participants, and one semi-structured one-on-one interview. This study included seven participants obtained utilizing purposive sampling. The interview protocol was designed with open-ended questions aligned to attempt to explore the research questions guiding this study.

This study yielded three major findings. The findings include: single mothers in urban communities hold a significant and critical understanding of their role in their child’s positive educational experience and identify several roles to support their children; despite their expressed and demonstrated willingness to be engaged in their child’s educational experience, urban families identified social factors such as single-parent households and a lack of job flexibility that impede their ability to fulfill that role; and family engagement strategies utilized by urban schools lack the flexibility of enriched learning opportunities for urban families. This study provides recommendations that may assist urban schools in enhancing their efforts to developing and implementing
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### Table of Contents

Dedication ................................................................................................................................ iii

Biographical Sketch .................................................................................................................. v

Abstract ................................................................................................................................... vi

Table of Contents ................................................................................................................... viii

List of Tables .......................................................................................................................... x

Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................................... 1
  Problem Statement ............................................................................................................... 7
  Theoretical Rationale ........................................................................................................ 12
  Statement of Purpose ....................................................................................................... 15
  Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 15
  Potential Significance of the Study .................................................................................. 15
  Definitions of Terms ....................................................................................................... 16
  Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................ 17

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature ..................................................................................... 1
  Introduction and Purpose ................................................................................................. 1
  Review of Literature ....................................................................................................... 1
  Chapter Summary .......................................................................................................... 22

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology ......................................................................... 23
  Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 23
  Research Context ............................................................................................................ 25
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
<td>Eligible Participants Demographic Profile Questionnaire Data</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.1</td>
<td>Summary of Findings, Themes, and Sub-Themes</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

In response to the current literature’s dearth of research on urban schools’ prioritization of low-income families when developing and implementing effective family engagement strategies, more work should be done to bridge this perceived gap. Family engagement in low-income communities is a challenge for urban schools as they attempt to raise student academic achievement. Extensive research has associated family engagement with positive student achievement, such as higher school grades and test scores (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Gutman & Eccles, 1999; Hill et al., 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). Considering the positive benefits of family engagement, policies, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), 2002, have been in place requiring urban schools to adopt comprehensive family engagement strategies in order to address the achievement gap between urban, rural, and suburban schools. Since families play a crucial role in their child’s educational success, it is critically important to include families in low-income communities in the development of the strategies. Thus, this study evaluated the perspectives of low-income families regarding their experiences with their child’s school to inform the development of urban school family engagement strategies.

Over the last several decades, the economic devastation in low-income urban settings has resulted in concentrated neighborhood poverty affecting the residents in these communities. A decline in the low-skill manufacturing employment that existed during the 1970s inspired a transition toward higher skilled jobs, which require higher skilled
workers (Rankin & Quane, 2000). This shift in employment opportunities produced a rise in the concentration of poverty in urban settings. In the same manner, the increase in poverty has led to the departure of the middle-class and stable working families from these neighborhoods, furthering the impoverishment of the community (Rankin & Quane, 2000). Similarly, when compared to middle or higher-income communities, income disparities are evident in the educational system, resulting in highly populated communities in which the effects of poverty trickle down into the neighborhood schools. Subsequently, achievement gaps develop across socioeconomic groups in the public education system in the United States. Inequality within the educational system is a problem that perpetuates poverty and social inequity, leading to the student achievement gaps associated with socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity (De Civita, Pagani, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 2004; Lareau, 2001). The gaps create a cycle in which those who can afford to live in communities with the educational resources to support their students achieve reap the benefits of education. Meanwhile, those such as low-income families, who lack the resources are left stagnant to face the obstacles to achieve the upward mobility that make up the American dream. Left unchecked, these inequalities exert a disproportionately negative impact on urban schools given the insufficient economic resources in the community-at-large.

Limited social mobility maintains poverty conditions in low-income communities, exposing children to poverty environments and causing them to be more likely to develop emotional, social, behavioral, and academic problems (Snyder, 2001; Tremblay, Mass, Pagani, & Vitaro, 1996). As these conditions become increasingly prevalent in the aforementioned communities, the task of addressing the achievement gap remains
challenging for urban schools. Early academic problems can be reduced with an increase in family engagement; but, without intervention and the development of early social competence of children in low-income urban communities, the achievement gap widens and the attainment of social capital diminishes (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Unfortunately, the effectiveness of efforts designed to eliminate the achievement gap through increased family engagement are weakened by parents who encounter barriers to their involvement. Low-income families are presented with challenging factors such as work schedules, lack of transportation, time poverty, and a lack of access, resources, and awareness (Hill & Taylor, 2004; William & Sanchez, 2011). Given the barriers that families face and the lack of social capital dedicated to the development of support systems, low-income families fail to obtain the full benefit of their schools’ resources. Correspondingly, the aforementioned complexities persist with schools’ current efforts to improve family engagement.

Families are sought out by schools using a myriad of strategies. One strategy is to ask families to participate within the school building while also tending to the learning of their child at home (Lee & Bowen, 2006). While this strategy may work for families that do not work during the day, it is not a best practice for low-income families who are often challenged by a lack of transportation or child care. These limitations prevent families from participating in school-based activities (Caplan, 2000). Conditions of poverty often require low-income families to make the impossible decision between meeting their basic living needs and being actively engaged with their child’s educational needs.

Obviously not exempt from the effects of economic devastation in low-income settings, urban schools are hit hard by the need for increased family engagement. Today,
one of the most noteworthy topics in public education is family engagement and its role in a child’s education. Family engagement has been understood by researchers and educators to be associated with improving student outcomes for elementary, middle, and high school students (Barnard, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Over the past three decades, education researchers and policymakers have identified family engagement as a key contributing factor to positive student achievement. Federal, state, and local policies encourage and mandate that schools comprise goals associated to family engagement in their programs. Despite the general consensus of its importance in a child’s academic success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), urban schools have been unable to capitalize on the opportunity to develop methods to garner consistent family engagement. Although, urban school leaders have good intentions in their approaches, their assumptions regarding what families in low-income communities want and/or need in order to flourish serve as a hindrance to improve their tactics. Therefore, the challenge for schools serving students in low-income communities is how to effectively engage parents and families in the education of their children.

The manner in which urban schools have traditionally attempted to connect with and engage low-income families remains one of the main causes of their plight. Family engagement strategies that are employed by urban schools are derived from the perspectives of policymakers who lack an understanding of the needs associated with low-income communities. Webster (2004) posits that the perspectives of policymakers regarding families in urban schools are largely informed by rhetoric, romanticism, and cultural views surrounding their conception of family engagement. Additionally, in an effort to increase family engagement and comply with the mandates NCLB (NCLB,
2002) and other similar policies, urban schools have adopted policymakers’ approaches, which have made little to no improvements. Strategies are ineffective because they do not accurately represent or support the cultural norms of low-income families who populate low-income communities (Abdul & Farmer, 2006; Bower & Griffin, 2011). Further, the discourse on family engagement has been inclined to favor the perspectives of the middle-class, whereas views regarding low-income family involvement tend to be negative. The urban schools’ lack of familiarity with the cultural perspectives of low-income families prevents them from appreciating the complexities that affect their students’ families, such as poverty. Therefore, failure to understand cultural disparities continues to present a barrier between low-income families and urban schools.

In addition to mutually understood perspectives, the connection between positive student achievement outcomes and family engagement is rooted in developing positive relationships. Family engagement develops partnerships to enable greater collaboration among the home and the school for the purpose of improving student academic outcomes (Troutman, 2001). Relationship building begins in informal settings where people learn about one another in different settings. These tactics help schools to acquire that which families value in order to meet students’ needs. As families and schools improve their collaborative relationship, student grade retention is reduced, and the support is provided for students who are at risk for poor educational and developmental outcomes (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). Positive working relationships among schools and families can be achieved if special attention is given to how schools seek to include all families.

Despite historic and contemporary efforts to improve family engagement in urban school settings, discouraging relationships persist between low-income families and
urban schools (Auerbach, 2002; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Epstein, 1996). Amidst the causes for debilitating home-school relationships are the difference in perspectives as to clearly identifying the ways in which low-income families may most effectively impact student achievement. This disconnect has led to declining parental involvement in their child’s educational experience at school.

A lack of family engagement in low-income, urban communities has long-term, negative effects on student success and leads to academic challenges. School failure in low-income communities for children from racially-ethnic minority groups leads to limited future opportunities (Oyserman, Brinkman, & Rhodes, 2007). Additionally, these urban students become challenged with social positions as their educational careers and/or aspirations are compromised. The lack of family engagement, when combined with family stressors associated with poverty and insufficient community and school resources, contributes to poor student performance. Academic challenges such as these limit the opportunities for children in every social class and limits social mobility (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2007). However, low-income urban families are affected disproportionately. All schools set out to educate children; however, inadequate educational experiences still give students an insufficient understanding of the consequences associated with a deprived education, further diminishing any vocational aspirations. Family engagement cultivates the belief that families’ social and cultural dynamics serve as empowering forces rather than impediments to the education of children (McKenna & Millan, 2013). Frankly, families who are unable to gain access to school resources are prevented from supporting their child’s academic success.
As research strongly supports family engagement as a significant element in children’s education, one has to contemplate why more urban schools are not actively engaged in partnering with families. Literature offers several reasons why home-school collaboration has either been ineffective, less than adequate for both parties, or at times non-existent. Barriers to increased family engagement can be the result of a difference in nonmatching cultures, conflicting perspectives, family constraints, values, and beliefs. Therefore, the opportunity for urban schools to collaborate with low-income families, to learn and improve the conditions of family engagement and the educational process for engagement, is necessary. Unfortunately, limited research has been devoted to an examination of low-income urban schools and how they utilize the perspectives of low-income families in order to develop and implement effective strategies for engaging families.

**Problem Statement**

While urban schools recognize the importance of families, they are faced with unique challenges to increase family engagement in low-income communities. School officials continue to request families to become involved without considering the socioeconomic status (SES) of the family (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Lareau, 2000; Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011). It is imperative for schools to understand that low-income families often have limited resources or opportunities to meet the requests for participation made by their child’s school. Although urban schools attempt to implement family engagement strategies, the strategies are often found to be ineffective. According to Delgado-Gaitan (1991), federal, state, and local district policies generally discount the unique needs of low-income families and communities. While low-income
families hold the same attitudes and beliefs about education as wealthier families regarding the importance of education, barriers to engagement and limited access reduce the likelihood of parental involvement in school functions. Opposed to raising student achievement outcomes in urban schools, these challenges create an engagement crisis, maintain the achievement gap, and reinforce barriers between schools and low-income families.

**Low-income urban settings.** There are many distinctive features that set low-income urban settings apart from rural and suburban settings. Students that comprise urban schools are characterized as diverse, poor, or at-risk (Foote, 2005). Students who attend urban schools are often classified as at-risk based on a myriad of characteristics considered to impact their academic success. Also, urban students are exposed to the violence that is often prevalent in impoverished communities, leading to learning problems and academic challenges (Foote, 2005). While traumatic, violent experiences may impact students in a variety of ways, the effects on academic outcomes in low-income urban settings is actionable and should be duly noted. Additionally, students in urban schools are characterized as having higher levels of absenteeism. Due to persistent changes in their families’ economic resources, students and their families move frequently from residence to residence, leading to inconsistent school attendance and increased transfer rates (Foote, 2005). The social and psychological issues associated with urban settings contribute to a variety of academic adversities. Subsequently, students in urban schools are faced with the residual effects of insufficient and inadequate resources in the community which impact the schools they attend.
Disparities in the educational opportunities among students in low-income urban communities are impacted by many contributing factors including a culture of poverty (Lewis, 1969). Differences in resources, academic performance, family structures, and communities are all areas which are impacted by poverty. A culture of poverty is shaped by the attitudes, values, and behaviors that are associated with impoverished communities. Lewis (1969) describes a culture of poverty as a subculture within Western society with its own structure and rationale. While the burdens of poverty are systematic and imposed upon the members of low-income communities, they result in the formation of an independent subculture as children become socialized into the behaviors and attitudes of said culture. By the age of 6 or 7, children will have internalized the beliefs and attitude of the subculture (Lewis, 1969). While a culture of poverty is not necessarily a cause for poverty, the attitudes, values, and behaviors can be characterized as some of the cultural norms within impoverished conditions. Once a culture of poverty comes into existence in low-income communities, it perpetuates a vicious cycle which impacts family engagement and prevents any meaningful transcendence toward improvement.

**Family engagement in low-income urban communities.** Families from diverse backgrounds vary in how they choose to engage with schools due to diverse susceptibilities toward certain behaviors, attitudes, or perceptions. In relation to family involvement, diverse predispositions are often derived from considering economic resources, educational knowledge, and experiences with and confidence in the education system (Grenfell & James, 1998). The involvement of low-income families is disproportionate to that of middle-class families due to a number of reasons. Whether low-income families may not wish to communicate with their child’s school due to their
low levels of educational attainment or they are unsettled about their lack of knowledge of the school system, the negative educational experiences of other families contribute to decreased involvement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). As families develop their personal insecurities, schools too often miss the opportunity to diminish the reservations that families may have about engaging with their schools.

Further confusing a nuanced and complicated issue, families from different cultures may place varying values on home-based involvement and school-based involvement. Without accounting for the full range of these variations, schools apply strategies that are solely school-based and Eurocentric in nature (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Smith, et al. 2011). School-based strategies place an emphasis on family participation in school activities, irrespective of the needs and limitations of low-income families. Eurocentric refers to the regard for European culture and ancestry and disregard for other cultures when crafting educational curricula (Lewis, 2015). Strategies that are derived from the Eurocentric lens cause schools to assume too much when dictating roles to families with regard to their child’s educational experience. Rather than insisting on these ineffective and non-inclusive methods, school leaders would do better to seek and employ cooperative methods for effective engagement. Ultimately, the preferred strategies place unrealistic demands on families. Exploring best practices for addressing these societal shortcomings, Epstein’s (1995) framework of six types of parent involvement has become a prevalent model used for developing family engagement strategies. This framework, which suggested volunteering and school workshops and other forms of conventional activities and wisdom in order to serve the purpose of increasing the presence of families in schools, is ineffective for low-income families in
particular (Bower & Griffin, 2011). For example, schools often expect families to be physically present at the school upon the school’s request. Traditional approaches limiting the family’s roles will lead to a continuously strained relationship between schools and families.

Current literature reveals that, despite historic and contemporary efforts to improve family engagement in urban school settings, discouraging relationships persist between low-income families and urban schools (Auerbach, 2002; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Epstein, 1996; McLoyd, 1990). As schools uphold alternate perspectives than that of low-income families, families will remain unsatisfied and left to feel disregarded in educational process. Historic disenfranchisement, systemic marginalization, cultural diversity, and language barriers serve as a few of the causes for the disengagement and distrust of low income families when schools stipulate participation in their child’s education (Fields-Smith, 2005). Further, the absence of more collaborative and trusting home-school relationships only limits low-income families’ knowledge of the benefits of participation in school affairs and the development of a savvy network within the school. Such knowledge appears to be prerequisites of opportunity and access not typically available to low-income families. As a result, the unique problems of students within urban schools are unaddressed and these students do not benefit from the potential positive outcomes of effective family engagement.

Family engagement will remain a challenge for schools that do not support families represented in the educational curricula. Therefore, low-income students attending urban schools with less engaged families will continue to experience fewer positive academic outcomes than students in more economically affluent settings.
Unfortunately, as students experience negative academic outcomes, they become increasingly at-risk in terms of achieving academic success (McLoyd, 1990). The lack of family engagement leaves low-income students further behind, widening the achievement gap. Unfortunately, limited research examines how low-income urban schools may glean research-based knowledge from the perspectives of their students’ families to inform their efforts to develop and implement effective strategies for engaging families.

**Theoretical Rationale**

This study utilizes social capital theory as the theoretical framework for exploring the relationship between the experiences of low-income families and the strategies to engage them in urban schools. As a theoretical export of sociology, educational researchers have sought to improve education through the social capital lens. Though the idea of the significance of social networks has most likely existed for decades, there is a general consensus that its contemporary relevance derives from the early research of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988). However, both Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) had divergent descriptions of social capital.

Bourdieu defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of a more or less institutionalized relationship of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 289). Put more simply, social capital is portrayed as the summation of all factors that affect one’s upward mobility. Income, family educational level, community influences, race, health, and quality of education are all examples of social capital. Conversely, Bourdieu’s definition explains social capital as the ability of a member of a community to acquire access to resources through established institutionalized relationships or social networks.
Ultimately, Bourdieu’s research would become the basis in which social capital would be conceptualized by other researchers.

Coleman’s work on social capital has led to decades of educational research applying the theory to explain school-family relationships. Coleman further developed the concept in order to conceptualize norms, social patterns, and processes, which contribute to the ethnic disparities of student achievement. Traditional family-school partnerships assume consensus and cooperation; however, they do not take into account collaborative efforts between families and schools (Auerbach, 2007). Schools decide when and how families should become involved rather than collaborating to reach a common goal. Coleman (1987) argued that the educational expectations, norms, and obligations that exist within a family and differ from those of schools, are important social capital that can influence the level of family participation, thus negatively impacting academic success.

The concept of social capital is a theoretical construct that illustrates the disparities in students' educational performance among different groups. Considering the challenges families in low-income communities face, students and families are at a disadvantage due to social structures (Auerbach, 2007). Some of the causes for the disparate academic success include family expectations and obligations for educating their children; a strong network and relationship between families whom the school serves; and the cultural norms and values that promote different students’ efforts. School efforts at engaging families reflect a focus toward middle-class norms, in which schools use the language and codes associated with said norms (Lareau, 1987). Therefore, families of average or higher income status have the ability to not only better interpret the
language and codes, but influence them, as well. Conversely, families of lower income may have a different understanding of their role and interpret engagement efforts differently and less successfully. Social capital permits the development of relationships between schools and families and has the potential to influence positive changes within a community.

Literature has emerged with empirical evidence regarding social capital’s relation to student educational outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002). Socioeconomic status, school, family, and community are all aspects of social capital that have significant impact on student educational outcomes (Coleman 1988; Lee & Bowen, 2006). For example, a middle-class family gains a social capital advantage when engaging with the school system. As such, they are aware of more opportunities and better equipped to navigate the school system in order to develop relationships. Taking these steps to garner social capital will positively influence their child’s academic success (Auerbach, 2007). Unfortunately, low-income families are often unable to gain the same level of social capital. As socioeconomic status and poverty continue to impact low-income communities, the ability to establish social capital with urban schools remains out of reach for low-income families. Therefore, as long as schools fail to form trustworthy relationships with low-income families, engagement will continue to decline.

Of utmost importance is building trustworthy relationships between families and schools. Social capital theory provides a lens to explain why family engagement remains a challenge in low-income urban settings. Effective family engagement is limited when trustworthy relationships between families and schools are lacking. According to Henderson and Mapp (2002), schools that prioritize their initiatives on developing respect
and trusting relationships are able to develop stronger family and community connections. Not surprisingly, families become disengaged when they do not perceive the school community to be a partner in their children’s education. Further disenfranchisement occurs when schools are seen as opposed to developing caring and trusting relationships with the lower income families.

Statement of Purpose

This qualitative study investigated the lived perspectives of low-income families regarding their family engagement experiences with their child’s urban school. This study tells the story of low-income families and identifies how these perspectives inform the development of urban school family engagement strategies.

Research Questions

This qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What perspectives do low-income families hold regarding their role in their child’s educational experience?

2. What strategies do low-income families identify as effective to engage them as contributors to their child’s educational experience?

Potential Significance of the Study

Urban schools must meet the stakeholders’ increasingly high demands and expectations of closing the achievement gap. School closures, the development of city-wide magnet schools, and the chartering of public schools are proven to be ineffective solutions for the economic challenges that impact the success of low-income students (Weis & Long, 2013). Additionally, federal legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) has increased school accountability for student performance
by mandating that all students in third through eighth grades take annual standardized achievement tests. (Sheldon, 2003). The accountability for student academic achievement has resulted in increasingly significant focus on high-stakes testing in schools.

Even though student performance on standardized achievement tests are one of the indicators to evaluating schools, such high standards are unachievable without the positive cooperation between families and schools (Castro et al, 2015). Actively engaging low-income families in the education of their children continues to represent a significant challenge for urban school educators (Williams & Sanchez, 2011). Urban schools must gain an understanding of appropriate methods for overcoming these obstacles in order to ensure the success of all students by engaging all families.

This research study aimed to investigate family engagement in low-income urban schools. Specifically, qualitative data was utilized to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of family engagement from urban low-income families. The results provide insight into the approaches available and appropriate to urban schools when developing collaborative strategies for engaging low-income urban families all in the name of improving student academic outcomes.

Definitions of Terms

**Family Engagement** – The continuous shared responsibility between families, school staff, and community members. Families are committed to actively supporting children’s learning and development, and the school staff and community members commit to partnering with families in a meaningful and culturally respectful ways (National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group, 2009).
**Family** - Parents and their children, or a group connected by blood, or marriage, or those who usually have common beliefs, values and culture; members of a household. Families may consist of grandparents, guardians, relatives and significant persons to the child (Barbour, 2001).

**Low-income** - Low-income schools are schools that receive greater than 50% of free and reduced lunches (Johnson, Kardos, Kauffman, Liu, & Donaldson, 2004).

**Urban** - The term *urban* became a pejorative code word for the large numbers of poor and minorities living in cities with a relatively high rate of poverty (as measured by free and reduced lunch), a relatively high proportion of students of color, a relatively high proportion of students who are Limited English Proficient and special education students, and those officially designated as “High Need” by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002).

**Chapter Summary**

Family engagement is a challenge for urban schools seeking to increase engagement in low-income communities with their students’ families and improve student academic outcomes. This chapter provides a framework for exploring the perspective of low-income families to address family engagement challenge and develop results for enhancement. Additionally, the chapter establishes a purpose and significance for the study. The theoretical framework of social capital is summarized, and the terms relevant to the understanding of the study are defined.

The remainder of this document includes four chapters. Chapter 2 summarizes the relevant literature and research regarding the phenomena of interest and topics including family engagement, low-income urban school settings, and family engagement
interventions and strategies. Chapter 3 outlines the research design methodology, research context, research participants, and the data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter 4 describes the data analysis, findings, and summarizes the results; and chapter 5 discusses the implications of the findings, limitations of the study, and includes recommendations and a conclusion.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the literature on urban school settings, family engagement, urban students, family engagement interventions and strategies, and student achievement. The literature identifies the ways in which low-income families are being engaged by urban schools. An examination of the relationship between family engagement and student outcomes is studied to establish a baseline of what is already known about family engagement in urban schools.

Researchers have noted that family engagement plays an important role in a child’s academic success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Accordingly, poor academic outcomes in low-income urban schools are attributed to a lack of family engagement. Although low-income urban schools attempt to implement family engagement strategies, their methods are often ineffective. Historic disenfranchisement, system marginalization, cultural diversity, and language barriers serve to keep low-income families disengaged from their child’s school, inhibiting their ability to participate in their child’s education (Field-Smith, 2005).

Review of Literature

Low-income urban school settings. The United States federal government has prioritized education reform for over 60 years (See Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 1954; Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965; No Child Left Behind Act, 2001) by developing initiatives particularly aimed at increasing educational
and social equity, easing access to resources, and ensuring student achievement in urban schools. By making this commitment to reform education in urban areas, schools could achieve improved student outcomes and reduce the achievement gap. However, these steps, by and large, have not been taken and urban public schools continue to fail urban students at alarming rates (Watson & Bogotch, 2015). Such failures result in poor school performance and limit the educational options that schools and parents afford their children.

School closures, the development of city-wide magnet schools, and the chartering of public schools are proven to be ineffective solutions for the economic challenges that impact the success of low-income students (Weis & Long, 2013). Current reform efforts increase the distance between schools and families in low-income urban settings. Despite research that identifies family engagement as a significant component in improving schools’ abilities to serve their large populations of low-income students (Barnard, 2004; Jeynes, 2012; Jeynes; 2014), urban schools have led to the widening of the achievement gap by failing to appropriately reframe family engagement (Watson & Bogotch, 2015).

Despite the requirement of family engagement in disadvantaged communities, as a result of the passing of federal policy through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, barriers are widespread for urban, low-income, immigrant, minority, and working class families (Smith et al., 2011). Students attending from these families are often faced with additional mitigating factors, such as: overcrowded classrooms, deplorable classroom equipment, and chronically insufficient basic material resources (Foote, 2005). This devastating, yet preventable, trend contributes to the widening of the achievement gap in urban schools.
Recognizing the dire need for solving the aforementioned perceived problems, Williams and Sanchez (2011) studied the barriers that separate parents from their ability to provide the same level of involvement as those parents not similarly encumbered. From the perspective of parents and school personnel at a predominately African American inner-city high school, parents explain the challenges that often prevent them from being involved. The qualitative study was conducted at Everett Public High School, which is within a large school district in the Midwest and comprised of approximately 92% students of color (Williams & Sanchez, 2011). The authors developed two semi-structured interview protocols to interview 25 participants consisting of parents and school personnel. From the interviews, the authors learned that, while parents wanted to be involved, they were met with obstacles. Furthermore, four descriptive themes emerged as barriers that dissuade and prevent parental involvement within low-income urban communities. Parents in such communities were faced with unique barriers, such as: time poverty, a lack of access, a lack of resources, and a lack of awareness (Williams & Sanchez, 2011). Additionally, participants in the study provided suggestions for encouraging involvement opportunities, incentives, and effective communication.

School engagement efforts and socioeconomic status (SES) represent two factors that are relevant to the study in that they contribute to the achievement gap in urban schools. Gonzalez and Jackson (2013) suggested that, although families take the initiative in engaging with schools, schools are responsible for establishing connections with families and effectively promoting involvement. Utilizing data form the U.S. Department of Education’s (2000) Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K), the researchers conducted a quantitative study to investigate
the relationship between school efforts to engage families, the average socioeconomic status of families, and kindergartners’ end-of-year reading and math results.

Gonzalez and Jackson (2013) sampled a population of 9,564 kindergarten students with reading scores within 586 schools and 11,608 kindergarten students with math scores with 691 schools. However, only students who contained both reading and math scores were included in the study. Given the robust sample, the researchers further argued that, if student achievement is to be positively impacted by parental involvement, schools must find ways to connect to all of their families, earn and establish mutual commitment, and ensure that all parents have a clear understanding of their child’s education. Gonzalez and Jackson (2013) suggested that the efforts made by schools to engage families often reflect a school culture based on middle-class norms, causing families in low-income schools to interpret efforts differently than families of a higher socioeconomic status. The difference in interpretation, as a result of socioeconomic status, has variant effects of student achievement.

Another example of salient research, Sheldon (2003) examined the efforts of low-income urban schools to confront and overcome the many challenges to parent and community engagement, setting the subsequent data as a predictor for higher student achievement. Using school year 1998-1999 survey data from the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), the study investigated school leaders reporting on the quality of targeted involvement activities, such as: school, family, and community partnership programs and its impact on state mandated assessment results. The survey data was combined with 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 Maryland School Perform Assessment Program (MSPAP) achievement data of elementary school in a large urban
area. In addition, the researcher sampled third and fifth grade data from 113 schools of which 82 schools contained complete data on their partnership program and averaged serving approximately 500 students in a predominately low-income and mobile population with 80% received free-reduced price lunches (Sheldon, 2003).

Similarly, Sheldon (2003) found that the degree to which schools were willing to confront challenges to parent and community involvement predicts more scores of satisfactory or above on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). Conversely, program organization did not significantly predict MSPAP achievement in any of the subjects (Sheldon, 2003). While mobility was consistent, it negatively impacted the percentage of students who achieved a satisfactory or above score on the MSPAP. The finding revealed that the school’s effort to engage families and the community in the student’s education were crucial in increasing student achievement.

Further examination on the challenges of increasing parental involvement in urban settings was conducted by Watson and Bogotch (2015). In a qualitative study, the duo researched how teachers and administrators in an urban high school identify and appreciate the known challenges to parental involvement. The researchers elected not to engage or influence the teachers and administrators’ shared operating concept of parental involvement. It is their misconception of the notion of parental involvement do administrators generally see Black and Latino families in urban schools (Watson & Bogotch, 2015). The researchers examined an urban high school with a student population containing 93% Hispanic and Black students and total student population of 1,324. Also, 1,002 students were on free- or reduced-price lunch plans at the time of the study (Watson & Bogotch, 2015).
Emerging from the study, four descriptive themes were identified. Furthermore, these emergent themes were utilized to classify the findings into different impediments to parental involvement, which are as follows: culture and language, poverty, overemployment, and access and literacy related to technology (Watson & Bogotch, 2015). The topics also characterize the challenges identified by school leaders when they endeavor to involve parents. Based on the data from their study, the researchers implored urban school leaders to reconstruct and reframe these themes in order to engender effective parent involvement.

Sociological interests in the implementation of policy tend to focus on single streams of policy that create a set of measurable consequences for parents or children. Newman and Chin (2003) utilized an ethnographic approach to the study of conflicting policy mandates that complicate the lives of families moving from welfare to work at the same time that schools are implementing high stakes testing and the end of social promotion.

Ethnographic interviews with this sample were conducted three times over a six-year period. The first wave of structured interviews were conducted from 1995-96, the second was conducted from 1998-99 and the third from 2001-02, forming the larger data base for this project (Newman & Chin, 2003). Of the 100 families, 12 families were selected to extensively study each family by spending several days a week for approximately one year. These 12 families—four African American, four Puerto Rican, and four Dominican, were chosen based on race/ethnicity, income, and the ages of their children. The sample was reduced to nine in this study to focus on families with elementary school aged children or younger (Newman & Chin, 2003).
Newman and Chin (2003) suggested that there are two significant types of adaptations to the concept of time poverty that have emerged among low-income and the working poor families. As they are faced with the increasing expectations of the school system, these families adapt to time poverty through monitoring and trade-offs, which pin the economic security and the occupational mobility of parents against the educational needs of their children (Newman & Chin, 2003). The close monitoring of children in school systems had given three sets of families a significant advantage in their children’s educational lives. Conversely, families who trade-off are forced to make critical decisions about their use of adult time to, either, prioritize jobs over the educational needs of their children, or vice versa (Newman & Chin, 2003). This study found that the two policies of welfare reform and high stakes testing make contradictory demands on parents, to the potential detriment of children.

Because of ill-conceived and ill-executed policies that fail to consider the difficulties specific to low-income urban families, schools negatively impact these families by providing woefully inadequate educational and assistive resources to students and their families. Children from these communities attempt to learn in environments that are unstable, disruptive, and chaotic (Reglin et al., 2003). Urban schools are more likely to have high rates of free-reduced lunch recipients, poor student outcomes, and school administrators who fail to reframe parental involvement outside of traditional school engagement efforts. The school engagement efforts reflect a rigid school culture based on middle-class norms. Subsequently, this culture does little to rescue students from the myriad challenges faced by low-income families (Gonzalez & Jackson, 2013).
These efforts lead to flagging parental involvement, a widening achievement gap, and fewer opportunities for developing social competence and social capital.

**Family engagement.** In ideal circumstances, a sense of family engagement can occur as the result of the continuous shared responsibility between students, parents, school staff, and community members. Accordingly, families commit to actively supporting student learning and development while school staff and community members commit to partnering with families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways (National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group, 2009). Such societal commitment encourages families to become active participants of the school community and tend to the learning of their child in the home (Epstein et al, 2002). Teachers and school administrators encourage families to support the academic pursuit of their children in order to contribute to their academic success. Researchers continue to find evidence that higher levels of family engagement are related to academic success for students (Epstein, 2001). However, one of the many challenges to understanding family engagement is that there exist many varied and inconsistent definitions for the term.

Family engagement in education has been defined as a family’s work with their child, and their child’s school, for the purpose of promoting positive academic development (Hill, et al., 2004). Theorists, such as Epstein (2001), suggest that family engagement, or parent involvement, consists of varied parenting practices that include both home-based and school-based strategies.

In their synthesis, Halgunseth & Peterson (2009) developed six comprehensive definitions of family engagement. First, families are encouraged to advocate for the interests of their children whenever decisions are made by educational programs.
Second, robust, two-way communication occurs on a regular basis and is initiated by both the family and school in a timely manner, using various methods and in the preferred language of the family. Third, how schools and families conduct informational transactions is investigated. Fourth, families and schools create and sustain learning activities as an extension of what has been taught by the child’s teachers. Fifth, educational programs collaborate with families to establish goals for children at home and at school. Finally, educational programs create an ongoing and comprehensive system that promotes family engagement. Contributing further to the myriad definitions of family engagement are Henderson and Mapp (2002). These two researchers posited that family engagement lies within the interactions that occur between families and schools for the purpose of supporting educational and student outcomes.

Family engagement in education is strongly emphasized in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act 2001 (NCLB, 2002). The act reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and is based on four key principles to provide a framework through which schools, families, and communities collaboratively improve student learning. These principles are highlighted in the parental involvement provision of Title I, Part A of the ESEA. The NCLB Act (NCLB, 2002) is supported by nearly three decades of research that provide substantial evidence on the importance of family engagement. According to the NCLB Act (NCLB, 2002), “when schools collaborate with parents to help their children learn and parents participated in school activities and decision-making about their child’s education, children achieve at higher levels.” Therefore, Title I, Part A of the ESEA (2002), which seeks to improve the academic achievement of the disadvantaged, defines parental involvement as the participation of
parents in regular, two-way communication that involves student learning and school-based activities.

Henderson and Berla’s (1994) work describes an interdependence within the relationships between schools and the home. The researchers synthesized the 66 studies, reviews, reports, analyses, and books in the area family and school partnerships. It was determined that students tend to succeed academically when schools effectively partner with families to support student achievement. According to Henderson & Berla (1994), income or social status is not the most accurate predictor of student achievement in school. Instead, accurate predictors include the extent to which families are able to create home environments that support and are conducive to learning, maintain high achievement expectations for their children, become involved in their children education at school (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Further examination of the relationship of parental involvement in urban schools was conducted by Jeynes (2005) to determine the effects for urban students. Jeynes (2005) conducted a meta-analysis study of the relationship between parent involvement and urban elementary school student academic achievement. The study sought to quantify the influence of parental involvement on the academic outcomes for urban elementary school students. Jeynes (2005) tested the relationship between parent involvement and student academic outcomes of urban elementary students in kindergarten through sixth grade. A result of the tests, the study found the relationship between parental involvement and urban elementary school student achievement held true for most components and measures of parent involvement.
The studies conducted by Henderson and Berla (1994), Jeynes (2005), Henderson and Mapp (2002), and Halgunseth and Peterson (2009) culminate to inform one of the most widely held beliefs in education, that the engagement of a student’s family is a key component in their success. Particularly in urban settings, schools must consider the diverse and multi-cultural needs of the students and families in which they serve without invoking the traditional paradigms for engagement, so that students are inspired and empowered to achieve academic success.

**Urban students.** Students attending urban schools perpetually encounter the effects of living in impoverished communities. The effects of economic disparities found within the educational system is a problem that enables poverty and social inequality while perpetuating achievement gaps associated with socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity (De Civita et al., 2004; Lareau, 2001). Inadequate educational resources may prohibit students from achieving their fullest potential. Poverty, low parental education attainment, and African American/Latino race/ethnicity are associated with low academic achievement (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007; De Civita et al., 2004). Although urban students do not control the environment and conditions in which they live, measures can be taken to counter the educational barriers they face. Family engagement may mediate the effects of poverty due to its positive association to children’s educational performance (Barnard, 2004; Cohen, Fantuzzo, Hampton, McWayne, & Sekino, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003).

A quantitative study, which was conducted by Lee and Bowen (2006), examined the impact of five types of parental involvement on elementary school students’ academic achievement by race/ethnicity, poverty, and parental educational attainment. The five
types of parental involvement examined were as follows: parental involvement at home, parent-child educational discussion, homework help, time management, and parental educational expectations.

Lee and Bowen (2006) found that parental involvement at school and parental educational expectations had the highest correlation to academic achievement. The achievement gap among children from different racial/ethnic backgrounds revealed that African American students and Hispanic/Latino students significantly underachieved, as compared to their European-American counterparts. Race/ethnicity was associated with inconsistency in three of the five measures of parent involvement; which, when demonstrated by parents in the dominant groups, had the strongest association with student academic achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Socioeconomic status was also associated with different levels of four of the five measures for parent involvement. As a result, the achievement gap was identified in the sample.

Supporting the notion of poverty and socioeconomic status (SES) contributing to the achievement gaps of low-income students, Crosnoe & Cooper (2007) conducted a quantitative study to examine the degree to which economically disadvantaged families affected parental involvement in a child’s education and academic orientation. These two also sought to moderate the linkage between them. The researchers argued that economically disadvantaged families are less likely to be involved, or engaged, in their child’s education due to the symptoms of time and financial constraints consistent with poverty (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2007).

Crosnoe and Cooper (2007) discovered that children’s academic orientation was not significantly associated with economic disadvantage before and after controlling to
the children’s characteristic. However, as the researchers predicted, parental involvement was significantly associated with economic disadvantage before controlling for children’s characteristics. After controlling for the children’s characteristics, the association was found to be insignificant. As a result, academic challenges for students limit the opportunities for children in every social class and limits social mobility (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2007). Thus, academic challenges have residual effects that serve to perpetuate a cycle of intergenerational poverty.

In seeking to understand the many risks encountered by low-income students, the literature cited in this study explains the critical importance of engaging the families of low-income students. Children raised in poverty face more challenges in school than children who are raised with middle-class economic resources. Low-income children are also at greater risk for lower grades and lower levels of achievement, due to the exigency of socioeconomic factors. Since low academic achievement leads to long-term effects on the child, their families, and the greater community, schools utilizing traditional middle-class strategies of family engagement will only contribute to the widening of the existing achievement gap.

**Family engagement interventions and strategies.** Family engagement interventions reinforce the relationship between families and schools. According to Halgunseth and Peterson (2009), the emphasis on the relationship helps to enhance student outcomes with the establishment of cross-system supports. In order to support the engagement of families and children’s learning, it is imperative for schools to utilize strategies that foster relationships with families. Halgunseth & Peterson (2009) conducted an extensive review of family engagement literature in order to determine its
relevance to children across ethnic backgrounds and within early education programs. The review conceptualized family engagement as an essential part of enhancing children’s learning and family well-being and determined strategies employed by schools must be appropriate for diverse populations.

While research has shown the positive association between family engagement activities and outcomes on early childhood learning, concerns have been raised about the traditional parental involvement paradigm as it fails to relate to contemporary ideals of cultural sensitivity. Traditional approaches for parent involvement cause families to perceive the methods as insensitive and inconsiderate (Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009). These paradigms focus primarily on the deficiencies of families and insist they adapt to the interventions of the school. Recommendations for enhancing family engagement included the integration of culture and community and the development of school-family partnerships.

Similarly, research by Schultz (2006) further established a strong argument for the importance of investigating dialogue centered on the development of strategies and whether these communications fail to effectively engage families or perpetuate a lack of empowerment and advocacy. In this study, the researcher extends on the concerns of Anderson (1998) regarding the limitations of the current efforts to foster relationships between schools, and local communities, focusing on impoverished urban communities of the United States. According to Schultz (2006), families who develop poor attitudes about schools and are less likely to participate and create the inability to influence the educational attainment of their children as a result of the skewed and ineffective dialogue (Schutz, 2006). The adverse effects on the academic success of children become more
prevailing in urban communities. Traditional strategies that ignore culturally-diverse families threaten opportunities for tangible education reform through “authentic or empowering participation” (Anderson, 1998, p.573). As a result, the methods are perceived as insensitive to the limited time and resources of struggling families.

Additional hypotheses exist that seek to explain how early intervention participation on the part of families have long-term effects on academic achievement for children. Miedel and Reynolds (1999) hypothesized that family involvement, in the early intervention process, enhances school performance. Miedel and Reynolds (1999) also studied the association between parent involvement in preschool and kindergarten intervention and the indicators of student achievement. As part of the Chicago Longitudinal Study (CLS), these researchers examined the retrospective reports of families pertaining to their engagement in early childhood intervention and their impact on the resulting reading level of children from kindergarten through eighth grade.

The study sampled 704 families who completed a 64 question survey to describe their personal experiences and the educational experience of their child during and after participation in an early childhood program. The researchers determined six explanatory measures which consisted of: the frequency in which parents were involved, the number of parent activities, child and family background, participation in child-parent centers, cognitive maturity, and teacher ratings. In addition, kindergarten, reading achievement, eighth-grade reading achievement, the rates of grade retention, and special education placement were determined as outcome measures (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

The study found a significant correlation between the frequency of parent involvement and the number of activities in which parents participated. The frequency
for parent involvement in preschool and kindergarten report by families was also found to be positively associated with the child’s kindergarten reading achievement. However, the frequency of parental involvement was not significantly associated with reading achievement in eighth grade (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). The study found that the frequency of family engagement and the number of activities in which parents participated were also associated with lower retention rates and special education placement.

Other researchers have blamed the increase in parents in the work force, modern society’s rapid pace, and increased family dissolution rates for the decline of family engagement in the education of children, specifically in urban areas (Jeynes, 2012). Consequently, school-based family engagement programs have been developed as a means of increasing family participation. Jeynes (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of 51 studies containing approximately 13,000 subjects to determine the effectiveness of various types of parental involvement programs on urban student academic achievement in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Given the purpose of the study, the researcher sought to answer two primary research questions: do school programs of parental involvement positively influence prekindergarten through 12th-grade students and what types of parental involvement programs help those students the most?

Given the importance of family engagement in urban education, it was necessary to examine to what degree specific programs contribute to the academic achievement of urban children (Jeynes, 2012). The findings determined there was an overall relationship between prekindergarten through 12th grade parental involvement programs and student academic success. Utilizing random-error assumptions, the results yielded more
conservative effect sizes as opposed to slightly larger effect sizes typically yielded from fixed-error assumptions. Overall parental involvement programs as a variable had a statistically significant result. Forty-nine of the 51 studies contained positive effect sizes. The findings also determined programs and educational outcomes to be slightly more related on standardized measures than non-standardized measures (GPA). However, the effect was not statically significant for secondary school students.

Additional research on interventions and strategies has focused on the specific influence of race in relation to the school involvement activities or parenting strategies of low-income family (Atkins, Brown, Hawkins, Lynn, & McKay, 2003). In a qualitative study, McKay et al. (2003) examined the process of racial socialization as it relates to African Americans, researching how parents and teachers’ perceptions of the school setting interact with racial perceptions, child rearing practices, and values influencing child rearing practices. As it pertains to African Americans, racial socialization operates in terms of values, religiosity, and cultural pride (McKay et al., 2003). The study attempted to correlate family engagement both at home and at school in order to examine the perspectives of both parents and teachers.

McKay et al. (2003) conducted the study in an inner-city elementary school located in large mid-western city in which the participants included 161 parents of 270 elementary students and 18 teachers (McKay et al., 2003). The researchers utilized three data collection instruments. First, the School and Family Partnership Scale, a 44-item parent and teacher reporting the type and level of parental involvement developed by Epstein and Lee (1995). Secondly, the Parent/School Social Support Scale (McKay et al., 2000; Paikoff, Mckay & McKinney, 1998), a 13-item questionnaire assessing the
relationship between then parent respondent and the parent community associated with the school. Finally, the Racial Socialization Scale, a 42-item parent and teacher self-report measure utilized to examine the degree of acceptance of racial socialization attitudes.

The findings of the study suggested that racial socialization processes are related to parent involvement in children’s schooling and that only increased efforts will bridge an expanding cultural gap between student families and teachers in inner-city communities (McKay et al., 2003). The study specifically examined school climate, formal contact with school staff, social support, racial awareness, religiosity, and cultural pride as variables when tracking parent involvement at home and at school. Parent reports of their involvement at school were found to be positively associated with opportunities for formal contact with school staff. Conversely, the perceptions of the school climate, social support of the parent community, and racism awareness were detractors to parent involvement in activities. McKay et al. (2003) determined that interventions designed to increase family engagement at home and at school are doomed to fail until they more thoroughly explore the associations among perceptions of racism, parent community support, and opportunities for involvement at school.

In a qualitative study, Ouiocho and Daoud (2006) suggested that traditional models and strategies for family engagement overlook other practices of culturally-diverse families. Dispelling the myths of family engagement associated with Latino families and their children’s education in southern California, the study also examined teachers’ perceptions of Latino family participation. The researchers conducted interviews at two underperforming elementary schools in Southern California in order to
recount the experiences of parents, teachers, students, and classified staff involved in the
two schools and their effectiveness on the academic achievement of English language
learners (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006). The researchers sampled 50 parents, 75 teachers and
10 instructional aides from School A compared to 20 parents, three teachers, six
instructional aides, three cafeteria employees, and two security officers from School B.

The findings determined that the teachers perceived families as unreliable and
minimally supported homework policies (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006). The findings also
revealed that although families perceived their own desire to participate in their child’s
education, they were faced with language barriers. Quiocho & Daoud (2006) concluded
that misperceptions of both parents and schools in urban elementary schools lead to
ineffective partnerships and negatively impact student academic outcomes.

Further research continued to examine the intervention strategies and approaches
to engaging families. Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar (2002) also
studied family engagement interventions and programs. The researchers evaluated 41
studies on school-aged family engagement programs and their effectiveness as a strategy
for improving K-12 student achievement. Mattingly et al. (2002) hypothesized that
previous studies provided evidence based on correlation studies, rather than a rigorous
evaluation on the impact that the programs evinced on student achievement. The study
supported the idea that rigorous parent involvement interventions are essential in schools.
Mattingly et al. (2002) found a gap between popular support and scientific evidence for
claims that schools can improve children’s academic achievement by increasing family
engagement with specifically designed intervention programs (Mattingly et al., 2002).
Although Mattingly et al. (2002) did not claim the intervention programs to be ineffective, the analysis revealed significant design, methodological, and analytical flaws.

Researchers have supported effective family engagement strategies in order to meet the specific needs of low-income families in urban settings. Numerous studies show that parental involvement/engagement is correlated with higher student academic achievement. The attempts to increase parental involvement have been a high priority of education policies at the local, state, and federal levels and are reflected in education reform legislation. The literature suggested that the development of parental involvement programs, as strategies for increasing involvement, is both promising and difficult (Jeynes, 2012). Although programs provide opportunities to improve the relationship between homes and schools and student achievement outcomes, the lack of a unifying, systematic method of evaluation for the effectiveness of various types of programs, as well as the subjective nature of identifying familial contributions to student learning, serve to further inhibit progress in this arena.

**Student achievement.** The impact of family engagement on student achievement was examined by Henderson & Mapp (2002). A meta-synthesis of 51 studies was published in 1995-2002 that examined one of the characteristics of schools that enjoyed vibrant family and community involvement, marking the impacts on student achievement. The findings of the analysis identified a positive relationship between family and community involvement, as well as benefits to student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Findings also supported that the relationship is positive across families of diverse, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds and for students of all ages. When families of diverse backgrounds are engaged in their children’s
education, children tend to achieve (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Children who are characterized as being at risk of failure or poor performance significantly benefit from family and community engagement.

Oyserman, Brinkman, and Rhodes (2007) alluded to a lack of clarity surrounding what family engagement means and how to accurately discern its influences on the academic achievement of children. These limitations and uncertainties further reduce the school’s ability to mitigate academic risk. Deficiencies in the process present challenges to target parent programs or to design school-based programs as safeguards for students whose parents are unable to maintain high levels of engagement at school (Oyserman et al., 2007). Instead, the researchers suggested that parent school involvement improves school outcomes, in part because involvement indicates to children that school success is important and attainable.

The findings of the effect of family engagement at school differed significantly for the control group compared to the intervention group youth. Parents of the control group had a positive effect on youth grade point average and teacher-rated classroom behavior. On the opposite end of the spectrum, low parent school involvement was associated with reduced academic success (Oyserman et al., 2007). For the students in the intervention group, parent school involvement did not influence grade point average or teacher-rated classroom behavior and low involvement did not have a negative effect on academic success. The direct influence of family engagement at school was unable to be tested as a result of collecting one post-only parent school involvement data point. However, results revealed that the negative effects of family engagement at school can be
improved by the development of interventions specifically designed for enhancing youth self-perceptions.

The above studies contribute to the understanding of one of the most widely held beliefs in education: that the engagement of a student’s family is a key component in their academic success. Particularly in urban schools, schools must consider the diverse needs of the students, families, and cultures in which they serve. Furthermore, these schools must choose not to conform to the canonized paradigms for engagement.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 provided a review of literature related to family engagement and low-income urban schools. Various studies discussed in this chapter support the need for a better understanding of the perspectives of low-income families in order to improve family engagement experiences in urban schools. Chapter 3 provides a summary of the research design methodology, research context, research participants, and the procedures for data collection and analysis for the purpose of responding to research questions guiding the study.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

A family engagement crisis currently exists between low-income families and urban schools. Unfortunately, limited research has been dedicated to demonstrating how urban schools can utilize the perspective of low-income families in order to develop effective family engagement strategies. Although urban schools acknowledge the importance and value of families, they are challenged with increasing family engagement among low-income families in low-income communities. Low-income families are members of a household connected by blood or marriage who have common beliefs, values, and cultures consisting of persons who are grandparents, parents and/or legal guardians to a child and qualify for free and reduced cost meals in public schools (Barbour, 2001; Johnson, Kardos, Kaufmann, Liu, & Donaldson, 2004). Schools continue to urge families to become involved, yet they may discount the obvious economic disparities that impede on their ability to participate in school activities (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Lareau, 2000; Smith et al., 2011). While low-income urban schools attempt to implement family engagement strategies, the strategies are often found to be untested and ineffective. According to Delgado-Gaitan (1991) federal, state, and local district policies generally, and routinely, discount the unique needs of low-income families and communities.

In addition, despite historic and contemporary efforts to improve family engagement in urban school settings, discouraging relationships persist between low-
income families and urban schools (Auerbach, 2002; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Epstein, 1996; McLoyd, 1990). Therefore, students attending urban schools with less engaged families will continue to experience fewer positive academic outcomes and maintain the existing achievement gap. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the perspectives of how low-income families experience family engagement in urban schools.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the phenomenological qualitative research design that guided this study. The research context and setting are described and the procedures for data collection and analysis are explained. Further description is provided regarding how participants are chosen, the recruitment procedures, and the estimated number of participants.

This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative research design in order to understand the perspectives of low-income families in urban communities. By capturing the essence of family engagement experiences in urban schools, qualitative research delivered an interpretive, naturalistic approach to investigation. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings as an attempt to make sense of phenomena in terms of the ascribed meanings. A phenomenological study was appropriate for this study because it deepens the understanding of the phenomena through the study of the experiences of participants that cannot be observed or measured statistically (Mertens & Wilson, 2012; Wilding & Whiteford, 2002).

The primary justification for using qualitative research should be that the specific research question requires the use of such an approach, as opposed to a different one (Flick, 2014). This qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What perspectives do low-income families hold regarding their role in their child’s educational experience?

2. What strategies do low-income families identify as effective to engage them as contributors to their child’s educational experience?

**Research Context**

The methodology that was applied to this study was a phenomenological qualitative design, which sought to gain meaningful insight on the phenomena of family engagement in low-income school settings. A phenomenological study provides answers to questions regarding the “structure, meaning, and the essence of the experience of a particular group of people” (Patton, 2002, p.104).

Focus groups were conducted and consisted of sample populations from three school districts in upstate New York: Albany City School District (ACSD), Troy City School District (Troy CSD), and the Schenectady City School District (Schenectady CSD). These districts are three of the largest school districts serving students in low-income urban communities in the Capital Region of upstate New York. The Albany City School District serves approximately 9,000 students in PK-12. Of this population, 66% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Similarly, Schenectady School district serves approximately 10,000 students in PK-12 where 80% are eligible for free and reduced lunch and, finally, the Troy City School serves approximately 4,000 students in PK-12 where 73% are eligible for free and reduced lunch (NYSED, 2015). The school districts were selected based on the free and reduced lunch demographic data that classified these districts as urban schools serving low-income populations. The districts
were also selected due to their proximity to the researcher and to one another. Combined, the three school districts have a 71% economically disadvantaged rate (NYSED, 2015).

Research Participants

The participants were recruited using a sampling selection from urban schools. According to Creswell (2009, p.179), “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposely select participants or sites that will best help the researcher’s understanding of the problem and the research.” Focus group participants are frequently selected using purposive sampling (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sanigub, 1996; Morgan, 1997), wherein the researcher selected participants based on the expertise and knowledge on the subject. Purposive sampling placed participants in groups relevant to the criteria determined by the research purpose and questions. Participants were required to meet the following criteria: be a parent or legal guardian of at least one child enrolled in a K-12 public school in either the Albany, Schenectady, or Troy city school districts, child/children were eligible for free or reduced meals, and earned an annual household income less than $44,955 for a family of four. The initial sample was comprised of participants who met the identifying factors. To increase reliability, the sample excluded participants with children who are no longer enrolled in the identified school district or exceeded the annual household income.

Participants were selected based on the criteria determined by the research purpose. The sample was comprised of female parents/guardians of students enrolled in urban schools. Focus groups consisted of eight to ten low-income families to gain a greater understanding of the phenomena. The recommended sampling size for a
A phenomenological study is five to 25 (Creswell, 2009; Mertens & Wilson, 2012; Morse, 2000).

Additionally, a variety of strategies were utilized to recruit participants for this study. In order to openly recruit families who resided within the identified communities and school districts, flyers were posted within in public locations such as laundromats, grocery store information boards, barbershops, and salons. School districts were not collaborated with in order disseminate recruitment information to their constituents. Additionally, flyers were not posted on school district properties. The flyer also invited participants who had at least one child enrolled in a traditional K-12 public school or charter school to participate in the study.

In addition, the demographic profile questionnaire and a letter of introduction with detailed information pertaining to the nature of the study were distributed by email to respondents to the flyer. Participants were also asked to indicate their primary language and indicated whether or not they would require the support of a translator at the time of the discussion. No participants indicated a need for a translator. Upon returning the completed demographic profile questionnaire, questionnaires were reviewed to identify all eligible participants. Eligible participants were contacted and invited to participate in the focus group discussion. Participants in this study were compensated with a one-time payment in the form of a $15.00 gift card for their participation.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

This study employed several techniques for the purpose of data collection. The techniques include: (a) demographic profile questionnaires; (b) semi-structured focus group interviews, and (c) field notes. Demographic profile questionnaires were provided
to gain background information (age, gender, household size, annual household income, etc.).

The data collected from the demographic questionnaires assisted the researcher in
developing descriptive profiles of all of the study participants and a description of the
overall sample.

Semi-structured interviews were utilized in order to collect qualitative data from
participants. These methods were somewhat preordained, as Creswell advises: “in
qualitative interviews, the researcher conducts face-to-face interviews with participants
…engaged in focus group interviews, with six to eight interviewees in each group”
(Creswell, 2009, p.181). Data consisted of an initial open-survey for families, and semi-
structured focus group interviews with families. Speaking on the importance of divergent
perspectives, prior research stated that “A semi-structured life world interview attempts
to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives”
(Brinkman & Kvale, 2015, p. 30).

Focus remained on unearthing more meticulous descriptions from the focus group
interview questionnaire and information regarding their personal backgrounds and family
engagement experiences. For the purpose of data collection for this study, two focus
group interviews were conducted. The focus groups consisted of six to 10 different
parents or legal guardians who served as primary caregivers. Prior to the focus group,
participants completed a demographic questionnaire on age, race, ethnicity, education,
socioeconomic status, the number of children under age 18 in the household, and current
or last grade attained in school.

Participants were informed that confidentiality was maintained by the researcher
in order to protect the participants’ privacy. To assure participant confidentiality, an
identification number was assigned to each questionnaire. A statement of confidentiality also reiterated the expectation of privacy and confidentiality of all participants. Focus group members participated in a 60-90 minute focus group interview that were recorded with audio devices in order to ensure the accuracy of participant responses. Participants were informed that the audio recordings will be transcribed without identifying information being associated with it. A note-taker/observer was employed and compensated a $25 gift card for each focus group conducted.

Focus group interviews consisted of open-ended questions, in which the participants answer them based on the knowledge the participants had available immediately (Flick, 2014). These interviews and all related observations generated field notes, which included the researchers additional handwritten notations made during data collection. Field notes provided feedback for any modifications that were needed to be made to the interview questions and inform improvements to the data collection process.

**Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

The analysis of the data collected for this study commenced by reporting the responses of the demographic questionnaire. The questionnaires were utilized to develop a descriptive profile of all participants. Data collected during the semi-structured focus group interviews were audibly recorded, transcribed, and reviewed by the researcher for accuracy. Inductive data analysis enabled the recognition of established “… patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up, by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (Creswell, 2009, p.175). The transcription phase permitted the full immersion into the data in order to begin uncovering and compiling the data.
The first steps included organizing, reading, and re-reading the transcripts and field notes with reflections in the hopes of identifying themes from the data. According to Marshall (1999), emergent themes (or categories) were developed by studying the transcripts repeatedly and considering possible meanings and how they fit with developing themes. The next steps included organizing and coding the data into meaningful groups, generating categories and themes (Creswell, 2003). Reflections of possible meanings were documented in a research log. As the themes emerge from data, a list of conceptual categories was formed and codes were developed for each conceptual category. Coded portions of the text associated to low-income family perspectives and family engagement were placed in a matrix for further analysis. Lastly, an interpretation of the data was reported in narrative form based on the new understanding of the findings.

All information obtained in this study was kept strictly confidential. This study adhered to procedures for maintaining confidentiality, archiving, and disposing data collected. All hard copies of data collected from participants and researcher analysis were securely stored in a locked filing cabinet under the personal control and supervision of the researcher. The filing cabinet was securely kept in the residence of the researcher for 3 years. All electronic data files such as audio recordings and transcripts were stored on in a password-protected external drive. After the study, both non-sensitive and sensitive data files were destroyed to further protect the confidentiality of the research subjects. Hard copies were shredded and electronic data files were deleted from all storage devices including recycling bins. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College approved the study in July 2017 (Appendix E).
Summary

Chapter 3 described the method used in a qualitative phenomenological study that explored the perspectives on low-income families and their influences on family engagement in urban schools. Specifically, research instrumentation and data analysis were discussed to investigate the experiences of low-income families in urban settings as they pertain to their engagement by the school. The objective of the study was to obtain descriptive data regarding a topic that has been perceived as minimally researched. The data collected for this study may provide a description of how urban schools approach family engagement, offering insight into how strategies to engage families are developed by schools serving low-income urban populations.

Chapter 4 describes the data analysis, presents the findings of this qualitative study, and summarizes the results.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

While researchers and educators associate much of the literature on family engagement with improving student outcomes, investigation to examine how low-income urban schools may utilize research-based knowledge, from the perspectives of their students’ families, would inform and bolster their efforts at developing and implementing effective strategies for engaging families. Family engagement in student learning, in general, is an area of opportunity for improvement for most schools (Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). However, urban schools, within low-income communities, encounter additional unique challenges as they attempt to improve student academic achievement. Because urban schools recognize family engagement as one of the most important factors in achieving student success, they work in earnest to overcome these distinctive challenges. Although urban schools attempt to implement family engagement strategies, the strategies are often found to be ineffective (Hill & Taylor, 2004; William & Sanchez, 2011). This qualitative study endeavored to gain improved understanding of the lived perspectives of low-income families, including family engagement with their child’s urban school. In addition, this research sought to identify how the aforementioned perspectives may inform the development of future family engagement strategies in urban schools.

This chapter presents the findings of this qualitative phenomenological study, which consists of qualitative data that was derived through extensive probing. The
researcher utilized qualitative phenomenological research methods for data collection, including: demographic profile questionnaires (Appendix A), a semi-structured focus group interview, a semi-structured one-on-one interview, and field notes. The focus group interview protocol (Appendix C) utilized semi-structured, open-ended questions aligned to the research questions in order to perceive and appreciate the specific lived experiences of low-income families with regard to family engagement in their child’s urban school. This chapter also identifies and discusses three especially salient emergent themes, defining them as role awareness, “a hard knock life,” and learning opportunities.

**Research Questions**

This qualitative, phenomenological study was guided by two research questions. The research questions are as follows:

1. What perspectives do low-income families hold regarding their role in their child’s educational experience?
2. What strategies do low-income families identify as effective to engage them as contributors to their child’s educational experience?

**Data Analysis and Findings**

**Participant selection and demographics.** The researcher acquired potential participants for this study through purposive sampling, identifying participants who illuminated the lived experiences of low-income families regarding family engagement in an urban school and the degree to which the school’s engagement strategies are successful when negotiating those lived experiences. Participant selection was based upon a review of this study’s inclusion criteria. To be eligible for this study, participants were required to meet the following criteria:
1. Be a parent or legal guardian of at least one child enrolled in a K-12 public or charter school in Albany, Schenectady, or Troy city school districts.

2. Eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

3. Earn an annual household income no more than $44,955 for a family of four.

Demographic profile questionnaires (Appendix A) were utilized to obtain background information of the potential participants and were reviewed to determine eligible participants based on self-reported data. Seven participants were identified, and, upon invitation, were self-selected into the research study. For the purpose of this research, pseudonyms were utilized to maintain anonymity. All of the participants for this study were female: Bonita, Ramona, Victoria, Monique, Cheryl, Leandra, and Lauren.

Table 4.1 presents data on the eligible participants based upon the demographic profile questionnaire. Ages ranged from 33 to 55 years old. Six participants self-identified as Black and one participant self-identified as White. Annual household income was presented in a range in order to allow participants to closely report their income without reservation. One participant earned an annual household income in the range of $10,000 to $14,999 for a household of four. In addition, two participants earned annual household incomes in the range of $25,000 to $29,999. Of these two participants, one represented a household size of two while the second represented a household size of three. The remaining four participants all earned annual household incomes in the range of $40,000 to $44,999 and each represented a household size of three.
Table 4.1
Eligible Participants Demographic Profile Questionnaire Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Annual Household Income</th>
<th>Household Size</th>
<th>Number of Children in K-12 Public School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bonita</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>$10,00-$14,999</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramona</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>$25,000-$29,999</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>$40,000-$44,999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>$40,000-$44,999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>$25,000-$29,999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leandra</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>$40,000-$44,999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>$40,000-$44,999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data collection and analysis.** To answer the research questions posed, the following techniques were employed for the purpose of data collection: demographic profile questionnaires (Appendix A), semi-structured focus group interviews, and field notes. The data collected from the demographic profile questionnaires was obtained via email prior to meeting with participants. The data collected from the demographic questionnaires was utilized to develop descriptive profiles of all of the study participants and a description of the overall sample.

A semi-structured focus group interview containing six participants was conducted by the researcher. An ensuing focus group interview with an expectancy of three total participants was reduced to one participant when two participants failed to attend the focus group discussion. As a result, the researcher conducted a semi-structured one-on-one interview. The demographic data for the absentee eligible participants was
not included in the sample for this study. The researcher utilized two audio recording devices for the focus group and one-on-one interview. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by an external consultant. To provide validity, reliability, and credibility, the researcher verified all transcripts against the audio recordings to correct any discrepancies, capture data from cues that were not noted in transcripts, and to ensure accuracy (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Preliminary coding of all transcripts was conducted by the researcher through line-by-line analysis. In addition, preliminary codes were peer reviewed to ensure accuracy. An inductive approach was applied to analyze the qualitative data, in which findings emerged from the data and the researcher’s full immersion and interaction with the data. The inductive approach enabled the researcher to establish patterns, categories and themes identified from abstract units of data (Creswell, 2009).

**Findings.** The perspectives of low-income families, regarding their lived experience with family engagement, are useful for the development of effective strategies by urban schools. This study intended to examine these experiences in order to further tell the stories of low-income families. This study yielded findings in three areas:

1. Single mothers in urban communities hold a significant and critical understanding of their role in their child’s positive educational experience and identify several roles to support their children.

2. Despite their expressed and demonstrated willingness to be engaged in their child’s educational experience, urban families identify social factors such as single parent households and lack of job flexibility that impede their ability to further fulfill their role.
3. Family engagement strategies utilized by urban school lack the flexibility of enriched learning opportunities for low-income families.

There were three themes that emerged from the in-depth data analysis which were frequently used by the participants who gave an account of their experiences. The three themes were (a) role awareness, (b) “a hard knock life.” and (c) learning opportunities. Additionally, eight sub-themes derived from the participants. These stories of the lived experiences addressed the aforementioned research questions.

**Role awareness.** The first theme that emerged from the data analysis, *role awareness*, aligned to Research Question 1. Since families play a crucial role in their child’s educational success, it was particularly critical to understand the extent to which families are aware of their role in the process. Families from diverse backgrounds vary in how they negotiate their engagement with urban schools based primarily on how they understand their role. Although diverse predispositions toward certain behaviors, attitudes, or perceptions may influence how families prioritize their role in their child’s education, the first finding, that low-income families hold a critical understanding of their role in their child’s education, revealed a common consistency among the perspectives of the participants. The three sub-themes within this theme included: (a) “be on the same page,” (b) “be present,” and (c) academic support.

“**Be on the same page.**” “Be on the same page” was a frequently utilized term among the majority of this study’s participants as they described their role in the child’s education. The participants shared that one aspect of their role that was often a priority was to ensure they maintained a parallel manner of thinking with their children’s teachers. By aligning their mindset with the teachers, participants demonstrated a style
and level of support that indicated how they chose to be engaged. The terms also categorized their views that the actions taken to support their children must be compatible with the actions of the school teachers. When asked to elaborate and provide examples of “being on the same page,” the majority of the participants conveyed a preference for consistent communication with teachers. Ultimately, the acknowledgement and understanding of school and classroom goals permitted participants to foster the engagement necessary to support their child in and out of the classroom.

Bonita, a 37 year-old African American woman whose annual household income was in the range of $10,000 to $14,000, is a single mother of three children, two in urban secondary schools (second and seventh grade) and one in college. During the interview, Bonita described her role as “…to stay on the same page as the teachers, and those that are responsible for teaching my children. It is my responsibility to ask questions…to pretty much have the teacher’s back.” Bonita indicated that she ensures that she holds the same views as her children’s teachers by posing questions that keep her abreast of how to support her children. Consequently, she is able to remain knowledgeable. Agreeing with Bonita, Ramona, a 55 year-old White woman, also a single mother with a 10th grader enrolled in traditional public high school, responded with her similar experience. Ramona stated, “I was very involved. I mean, I knew. I helped with homework. I knew exactly what she [my child] was doing. When I talked to the teacher, I knew what they were doing.”

Similarly, other participants, such as Leandra and Monique, provided similar descriptions of their desire to stay “on the same page.” They have subscribed to a “whatever it takes or needs to be done” mindset and view supporting the teachers as an
integral part of their role. Leandra is a 33 year-old African American who earns an annual household income of $40,000 to $44,000. Her daughter is in fourth grade at one of the local urban elementary schools. Monique is a 36 year-old African American who also earns an annual household income in the range of $40,000 to $44,000. She has a daughter in 10th grade and a son in fourth grade. These single mothers believe that their objective is not solely to remain consistent with their children’s teacher; but, to also demonstrate their consistency with actions external of the school in order to further support the learning at home. In particular, Leandra explained:

I would say that my number one role is to support that teacher in and out of the classroom when it comes to my daughter. So whether that is working on multiplication at home and buying different textbooks at home so she can have some practice at home.

Leandra maintains high expectations to ensure that she supports her daughter’s learning with the acquisition of supplemental curriculum materials. By “being on the same page” and aligning herself with the teacher, Leandra is empowered to support both her child and the teacher within and outside of the classroom in ways that are mutually beneficial.

Families feel obligated to have personal ownership when establishing a mutual understanding with the teachers or the individuals directly instructing their children. Accordingly, these participants prioritize their actions toward desired outcomes. For example, making regular and periodic inquiries with school regarding their children’s learning has proven to help families maintain consistent communication in order to “be on the same page.” In addition, their perspective on the education of their children
further indicates an emphasis on working collaboratively with school personnel. The absence of their self-imposed duty could render consequential outcomes. Ultimately, these participants describe themselves as among a group of families that, rather than struggle in a system that too often overlooks their strife, has chosen to develop a manner of thinking that isn’t reliant upon the school to act as the sole actors in the educational experience of their children. On the other hand, some participants sought ways to increase their presence as they provide their understanding of the role in their child’s education.

**Academic support.** Similarly, as the participants reflected on the ways in which they supported their children’s education, the third sub-theme that emerged from the data was academic support. As described by participants, academic support refers to the wide variety of ways, whether instructional methods or actions taken, in which participants provide their children in an effort to help them accelerate their learning goals and succeed in school. In practice, academic support for some of the participants places an emphasis on their intentionality to actively monitor school-related assignment, support and/or address academic shortcomings, or provide opportunities for enrichment to occur. For example, Monique duties include “follow-up whatever is done in the class and at home as well” as she seeks to support her fourth grade son’s academically. Monique added:

> I feel my role as a parent in terms of education is to understand what's being taught in school & assist my child in areas that he's struggling in. I check his homework to see what has been taught in school that day and have him make corrections when necessary. Also I try to go over it with
him to make sure he really understands the concepts and see if he needs additional help.

Monique considers maintaining an active role in monitoring her son’s academic tasks grants her the opportunity to gain familiarity with class curriculum and how he is achieving. Checking homework for accuracy and mastery of learning objectives is consistently expected. As she identifies lagging skills that could further achievement gaps, she immediately intercedes to ensure that any impressions of her child struggling are addressed.

Other participants such and Cheryl and Leandra, also expressed how “academic support” was an integral role that was played. Both Cheryl and Leandra have applied a variety of approaches and habits that help their children meet classroom learning goals. Leandra developed habits early in her daughter educational experience which appeared to be driven by a desire to achieve excellence. Leandra believes that her child is a representation of her consistent efforts to reduce academic failure. During the interview, Leandra provided some of the instructional strategies employed. She described:

As a parent I feel it is my duty to send my best child to school every day and to continue her learning at home, because practice makes perfect. From the time she was in daycare we would trace letter and read books. When she was able to read, I would let her read our bedtime stories. When she started writing, we started a journal for her and I to write in. I thought it would be a great way to have her write more. I also bought a number of workbooks and manipulative from Barnes and Noble and the parent teacher store [to] help enforce skills she was learning in school as
well as things she will learn. I was very diligent when picking out her
workbooks, I teach her on parallel levels; grade level, things she’s
learning, and the next grade or so up, things she will learn. My daughter
loves learning new things and working on her frustration level gets her
wheels spinning and she will not stop until she has mastered it.

Much of Leandra’s approach to academic support is based on maintaining
academic rigor that will lead to positive outcomes for her child. Leandra is methodical
about the materials that she acquires and intentional as her focus is on developing her
daughter’s reading, writing and math skills. The initiatives taken are don’t appear to be
impact by limit resources as Leandra used her economic resources to further supplement
her daughter’s education. Ultimately, she believes her role is to develop a level of
consistent support that relentlessly prepares her child to achieve academically.

Cheryl shared a unique perspective regarding her role which not only
highlights how she provides academic support but also encourages her children’s
participation in enrichment activities. The success she expects to see from her
children is a byproduct of her deliberate her methods are to be engaged. Cheryl
shared:

The way I support my children’s education is by communicating with my
child discussing any difficulties with certain subjects they need help with.
If so, helping them and also providing a tutor. Speaking with the
teachers/staff. Any projects they may have, buying the materials and
helping them out letting them know that I am involved with them
achieving a good grade.
The participants’ intentionality to support the academic development of their children serves as evidence as to where special attention is paid to maintain an active role. In addition, the duties performed by the participants reflect how they have conceptualized the critical role they play by applying unique and practical means that are beneficial to the child’s educational experience.

**A hard knock life.** The second theme that emerged from the data analysis, which aligned with Research Question 1, was *a hard knock life*. This theme materialized from a category that captured many of the circumstances and barriers that participants described as being impactful to the fulfillment of their various roles. *A hard knock life* also supported the second key finding; that, despite their expressed and demonstrated willingness to be engaged in their child’s positive educational experience, social factors often impede the ability of parents to fulfill their role. Social factors, such as single-parenting and time limitations related to rigid job schedules are viewed as the elements of their world, or social settings, that consistently block their progress. Picked from the lived experiences of the participants, these two social factors represent this study’s two sub-themes, “single mother” and *work: lack of school and job flexibility*. Revealing the situations that the participants face deepened understanding and engendered further examination of the perspectives held, by participants, regarding their roles.

**“Single mother.”** Based on the stories shared by the participants, being a single mother is a social factor that has complicated their parenting efforts. During the interview, all of the participants self-identified as single mothers and spoke to how being a single mother negatively impacted their role. In order to gain this insight on their experience, the researcher asked the participants to describe what barriers, if any, may
limit their participation in their child’s education. According to these participants, single mothers often feel overwhelmed. For example, Ramona shared: “people have a lot on their plates.” For many participants, such as Bonita, attempting to, single-handedly, address the variety of responsibilities associated with being a single mother is not a feasible choice. The absence of a second parent in the household impacts the remaining parent’s willingness to perform their responsibilities, as their time and energy are constantly depleted. In describing her experience as a single parent, Bonita shared:

[Single mother] gotta do it all. No time. Don't even really always feel like it because you gotta do…you gotta do your jumping jacks, you gotta eat your bowls of Wheaties before you going into school with these tough kids. I'm telling you. All the time, I don't feel like it.

As Bonita further described, being a single mom impacted her willingness to be active in her child’s education:

As a single mother, my mind is always on other things and sometimes I have to choose between, well do you want to go and do this in a school.

At times our choices lead us to having to pull away from the school, from being involved in it and everything.

Meanwhile, participants Cheryl and Lauren shared the attitude that seemed to be triggered by Bonita’s point of view. Cheryl expressed “the single mother. That's where the single mother comes from. You're struggling doing it by herself.” Lauren chimed in expressing “yeah, exactly. Right now I'm struggling.”. Single motherhood appeared to thrust Bonita into a dilemma, in which she is constantly forced to make critical decisions about her child and all other competing priorities in her life, reducing her ability to be
fully engaged. Subsequently, the stress of seeking satisfactory employment in order to meet the family’s basic needs for housing and food can, from time to time, overwhelm her. During these times, a desire to not be faced with these critical decisions causes Bonita to withdraw from engaging with her children’s school.

In the same way, Lauren shared how the effects of being a single mother exerts negative force on her role as a parent, as she struggles to make important family decisions on a daily basis. Lauren maintains that serving as her children’s primary educator is chief among her parental responsibilities and feels the need to satisfy that aspect of her role on a consistent basis. Expounding on this idea, Lauren added:

That [single mother] is I think my biggest ... that's just the biggest one.
That's the only one. I mean, Maslow's hierarchy of needs to be point blank. If I can't feed you, if I can't make sure there's a roof over our head, if I can't work then I can't even think of elevating myself, [and] elevating the children. That's such a hard burden to carry knowing that you're the first educator that your child is supposed to have in the first place. Then I have to depend on the school system to help me with that because I can't even do [sighs] ... It's a huge burden and struggle that I still carry to this day.

Unfortunately, being a single mother is a burden and a limitation for Lauren. She is left with very little opportunity to forfeit her obligation to meet the needs of her family, which remains her undisputed priority. However, Lauren is gripped with contrition whenever she relinquishes her control to the school for the sake of her child’s educational success.
Furthermore, the barriers presented also describe the experiences of heightened stress and pressure associated with being a single mother who is also disadvantaged, socioeconomically. These stressors cause families to further deal, sometimes unsuccessfully, with the external issues that indirectly impact their desires to fulfill their role as effective parents. The complexities of single motherhood within low-income communities sometimes prevented the participants from fulfilling their self-appointed parental role.

Ultimately, these perspectives reveal a sense of failure when evaluating their ability to achieve desired engagement, given the challenges associated with single-parenting. These participants’ accounts support how social factors create barriers to fulfilling the roles and responsibilities of parenthood, despite their dedication and willingness to be engaged.

Work: lack of school and job flexibility. Interview data revealed a second, significant barrier to low-income families, as they endeavor to be engaged, work: a lack of school and job flexibility. Employment activities consume much of a single parent’s time, preventing them from engaging more in their child’s education. Six participants acknowledged that the ways and levels in which they desire to be involved are frequently disrupted, not only by their obligation to work, but also due to the rigidity of their work schedule. In addition, participants stated that the school lacked the ability to be flexible, as it pertains to accommodating their work schedules. By and large, participants have the desire to serve an active role at home with their children, while also participating within the school. However, their employment takes precedence, often precluding any physical attendance of school-related activities. Work hours and school hours are in constant
conflict. Underscoring this conflict, Ramona, a single mother of a high school student, suggested:

I think it's our society. I think people just don't have time. They're juggling everything, working hard. There are times that's the case for me definitely. But most parents by the time your kid's in high school, you're working full-time.

During the interview, Leandra and Monique attested to their issue with work schedules. They both spoke of conflict with their children’s school when seeking to participate in classroom activities. Leandra described that her biggest predicament is budgeting her work time in the event of emergencies related to her daughter. Expounding on her uncertainties as a struggling single mom, she stated:

I think another barrier is also your work schedule. I would love to be the class mom and come in and read to some of the kids, but I also have to go to work. What do I do? Do I take a day off and then my child gets sick, now I'm running into, “oh I don't have any more time” so my pay is getting docked, but my child is really sick so I have to pick and choose what days to take off so I can have a bank just in case she gets pink eye or gets sent home from school with a fever and now can't go to school the next day. I'm really limited in terms of what I can do during the normal school hours. But if it's after school, I'm there.

The decisions weighed by Leandra are consistent with working families and is a primary reason for low in-school engagement. Time is a resource that must be carefully monitored. Consequently, the accumulation of time out of work for Leandra, and other
single mothers like her, often results in a loss in wages earned. Unfortunately, decreased wages are not an outcome that many are able to afford. By the same token, Monique echoed Leandra’s personal experience as she stated: “Cause like, at my son's school you could be a classroom parent. Of course, I would love to be a classroom parent, but again I have to work.” However, provided the opportunity to engage after the school day has concluded, Leandra is likely to commit.

On the other hand, the inflexibility of job schedule does not solely limit participation in enriching school activities. Participants, such as Victoria and Ramona, recalled personal experiences where work limited their ability to be present for more serious matters. Victoria, whose youngest son is in third grade and experiencing behavior challenges, shared: “I go to the school often, but when they call, just like, ’yeah, you gotta come pick ’em up.’ I'm like, 'I gotta work.” Similarly, Ramona was unable to support her 10th grade daughter as the school sought to impose disciplinary actions on her child. Ramona described the challenge of experiencing a challenging moment when she shared the next few sentences on the matter:

My daughter's had a couple bad experiences…I supported the school. I said, "Take her cellphone away. Do whatever you need to do." But they just bombarded her with question after question after question and then they gave her in-school suspension for two days. I wish I had been free enough that I could have left work and actually been with her maybe to help her because she felt that everyone was against her.

As Ramona reflected on her daughter’s experience, she concluded, “but when I realized, when something comes up…you take the time.” The challenges associated with
inflexible work schedules have potentially long-term effects, causing families choose work over engaging at a crucial moment. As a consequence, Ramona’s absence and lack of support further affected her perspective to respond differently to aid her daughter within the school.

At the same time, Lauren added: “I always worked a lot and that kind of hindered me being as responsive to my children's issues in schools as I would want to be.” Consequently, not only is Lauren often unable to address school-related issues as desired, her work schedule also limits her ability to support her daughter’s extracurricular activities. Further, Lauren expressed: “Like today is my daughter's first basketball game. I'm not gonna be there cause I gotta go to work.”

Conversely, not all participants selected gainful employment and inflexible schedules over participating in their children education. However, these different decisions brought their own, unique challenges. Particularly, Bonita revealed a different perspective. Nearly on the verge of tears and visibly emotional, Bonita vulnerably shared her lived experience, explaining:

I have four children and I had a different outlook on raising my children. The first 4 or 5 years of my children's life, I did not work. Whatever work I was doing, I stopped it and I took it upon myself to put in my children what I wanted to put in them. I was always in the schools. I was always there, always available. Got awards for, of course, being the best mom, I ain't have no job, that's why I'm always here. Everything that I put in them [my children] is coming out, but our financial situation is, it sucks! You understand what I'm saying? Being a single mother it's like ... A lot of
us do choose to go to work and be there as much as we can, but I did the opposite. I stayed at home as much as I can, but my finances suffered, even to this day, my finances suffer because of that. You understand what I'm saying? Yeah, my son just got suspended for the third time in October [and I’m available] but ask me where my job is at right now? Not existent.

Bonita’s critical, and life-altering, decision to forfeit employment in order to fully commit to the educational experience of her children has intensified the challenges she faces as a single parent. As a result, she stresses over long-term, sustainable support of her household. Bonita, who has four children, (the most of among the participants) earns the lowest annual household income, in the range of $10,000 to $14,000. Although Bonita is able to be fully engaged inside and outside of her children’s school, her immense sacrifices are obvious and unavoidable.

As participants recalled their lived experiences associated with the social factors that impede their desired level of participation in their child’s education, further insight was gained regarding their unique perspectives and roles. The difficulties of being a single mother and encountering a lack of school and job flexibility are factors that led to discontentment and, at times, contrition about the inability to engage in school-based activities, and an inability to serve as active contributors to their child’s educational experience. Therefore, participants offered what they believed to be viable solutions to the challenges they encounter and give them an opportunity to significantly maximize the role as families.

Learning opportunities. The third, and final, theme that emerges from the data analysis answered Research Question 2, what strategies do low-income families identify
as effective to engage them as contributors the child’s educational experience? The theme, learning opportunities, supported the findings that family engagement strategies do not offer viable, substantive enrichment opportunities to low-income families. The sub-themes identified include “culture of knowing,” “we need workshops,” and innovative use of technology. Many participants alluded to the notion that schools’ current strategies must be improved in order to more effectively engage them within the school. Participants identified the current methods employed by schools and suggested new approaches to addressing a diverse parent population and engaging all of them as contributors to their children’s educational experience.

“culture of knowing.” In-depth data analysis revealed the first sub-theme, culture of knowing.” Of the seven participants, four participants acknowledged that, in order for their child’s school to establish strategies that are effective to engaging them, schools must prioritize developing new learning opportunities for school personnel that define and foster a culture of knowing. This theme materialized from a category which captured, in essence, the participants’ perspective that schools lack cultural competence when engaging with families in underserved communities. Great emphasis was placed on the need for schools to obtain a profound understanding of the context of students, families, and the community at large if they seek to invigorate families. The absence of this knowledge and understanding produces a gap between the strategies developed by the schools and the effectiveness of the implementation of said strategies. Participants, such as Lauren, Leandra and Monique, highlighted how the schools’ deliberate attention to prioritizing an increase in their knowledge of the demography must be inclusive of all stakeholders. They believe that, if provided adequate professional development and
training, teachers are able to improve their instruction to students and their interactions with families. During the interview, Lauren expressed:

I think it's just, it's very important from the educators, city administrators to really build the culture of knowing what ... knowing the type of students that you're dealing with. Knowing the type of families in the community that you're in...also, just like for the principals or whoever is at the higher levels to create cultures to where that [family engagement] is very important. The parent engagement pieces is culturally embedded in that school.

Similarly, Leandra conveyed:

If you do have teachers that's coming in that don't know, then we need to start with the cultural diversity and really making sure that the people who are working with our children and who are with our children really get [understand] them, know them and are helping them to be successful. And know how to work with these families and engage with them.

Schools can develop a “culture of knowing” by intentionally building the capacity for cultural competency at the systematic and individual levels, in order to alleviate many of the challenges faced with engaging low-income family. The current absence, or lack thereof, has led some participants to conclude that they may not necessarily feel welcomed at all engagement opportunities. Additionally, cultural diversity training and training in family engagement approaches are essential for developing other means of engaging in their child’s education.
In the same way, Monique expanded on this notion, while adding how a “culture of knowing” increases the school personnel’s ability to be relatable:

Just from the top level down starting with our top executive level to ... that cultural diversity is needed because you have to be relatable to the students and the families that you're working with. You have to know ...

We already know what the demographic is. It ain't us choosing where we want to go, we know what we working with. We really need to be able to relate to them and know what it is, because how are we going to be successful. How we gonna make sure that the kids are successful, these families are successful, if we can't relate to them?

“we need workshops.” Six participants placed an emphasis on the need for their schools to develop and implement strategies that facilitate learning opportunities through family-centered workshops. Family-centered workshops offer families the chance to gain substantive experiences that are deemed to be enriching, and more apt to effectively engage them. In comparison to strategies currently employed by their children’s schools, workshops may offer a remedy to the lack of school-based engagement for participants.

When participants were asked to describe the ways in which they believed their child’s school attempted to offer families a chance to participate within the school and contribute to their child’s educational experience, they cited a lack of sufficient family-centered events in which families felt they were adequately engaged. For example, Leandra vocalized that the schools’ intentions were initially positive but were not sustained. Leandra candidly explained, “other than parent night, and back to school night, I don't feel like my child's school does a ... goes above and beyond with trying to
get parents involved.” She further indicated that the school was not making a good faith effort at communicating with her. Leandra further elaborated:

I would say for, in the beginning of the school year, I think they do a really good job at it. Meet the parents, but then throughout the rest of the year, other than maybe breakfast with dads or something like that, there are no other things [events] that go on to where parents come to outside of like extracurricular activities. My child plays the violin, so there is Winter Concert that's held afterschool.

School strategies for engaging families have been primarily focused on gathering families together to participate in social events, such as introductory events held in the beginning of the year or student recitals. Leandra’s experience has informed her to expect strong efforts on the part of the school early in the school year. A time in which motivation is high and families and students are excited to start the year. However, Leandra feels that the opportunities for families to experience events that are practical or applicable remains inexistent in her daughter’s school.

Similarly, the notion that schools make initial efforts to increase family engagement, but that those efforts are not sustained, resonated with Lauren. Accordingly, she responded to Leandra’s experience, sharing:

I kind of agree with what you’re saying, like, in the beginning [of the school year], there was these meet the teachers type of things. Then as the school year goes on, it's just like the concerts, or maybe the games, whatever, and that's it. I do feel like its important, but I just can't say that they're engaging me in anything, in much of anything in trying to be part
of [the school] besides her concert that’s coming. I don't think I've experienced too much of them trying to really engage parents, and things that are going on in school.

While remaining engaged is of significant importance to her, Lauren holds the same sentiment that her daughter’s school is not seeking to fully engaging her when their efforts are aimed on promoting special events, such as winter concerts.

In contrast, other participants held content feelings and acknowledged that efforts made on the part of the school were “trying” to engage family within the school. To illustrate the positive, Cheryl attested:

They do arts and crafts, so if your child did an art project they have an Arts Day where all the parents can come and look [at the art]. They have a science thing where if your child did a science project, all the parents can come and look at all the kids' work. They try to get the kids involved and the parents involved with certain type of parent and teacher evenings at the school. They have a Halloween party, they try to keep the parent's active with the children.

While Monique shared her positive feelings about the effective strategies of her child’s school, she also expressed that she felt overwhelmed by some of the school’s strategies for engagement. The oversaturation of events, coupled with her existing schedule of responsibility, make her participation a physical impossibility. As a result, Monique believes that reducing the number of school events could alleviate some of the pressures that an over-worked, single parent might be feeling, saying:
My son's school does a good job of having the parents engaged and active. I honestly sometimes think it's too much though because the day's already are long, and the school days are long, the work days are long so, some of those events, I think they could actually cut down on some of them.

Victoria also shared some positive experiences with her child’s school. She, and her child, were given opportunities to choose from the school’s extensive list of voluntary activities. On this subject, she described her school’s offered options with the following: They do have a lot of things that you could sign up for in the ... I'm always there so always talk to me about just coming in, just helping them out with different things. It's not always just like parties and stuff like that but like I'm having a voice. They actually are very ... They do very well with that.

Cheryl, Monique, and Victoria are, more or less, fully aware of the strategies in which their children’s schools attempt to increase and maintain engagement with families. Describing their experiences with the current strategies utilized by their children’s schools to engage families, participants identified some consistent efforts to engage parents with family-friendly social events. However, the events described were seen mostly as a means for enticing families to come into the school to assist or view their children’s work on display. Participants were not opposed to special events or special days; however, the participants indicated a preference for opportunities for learning and development for families.

Comparatively, in her recollection of experiences with her child’s high school, Ramona described an unexpected discovery about family engagement strategies that were
contrary to her assumptions. To her point, Ramona provided the following personal information:

I was surprised when I went to the open house that they are trying to encourage parents to come into the high school...well, right now, they have this person...She's called parental [coordinator] ... I forgot what her title is. And they actually have these meetings once a month and they're trying to get the family intermingled into the school system. Her job is just to connect the parents with the teachers, with that. They're trying to make it that way. They really are. I mean, we also have this thing called Parent University.

Ramona supports the notions that schools are attempting to engage families to the extent that her child’s school has designated a member of the school that seeks to implement various methods for ensuring meaningful engagement experiences in the face of the adversities that families experience. Ramona highlights a component of the school that appeared to be intentional about fostering opportunities for parents and families to be learning. “Parent University” implies an emphasis on providing higher learning experiences for families. Ramona gives the impression that this experience was valuable to her.

When participants were asked to provide suggestions that schools could use to more effectively engage them in their child’s education, many participants suggested efforts on mobilizing parents with substantive learning opportunities. Bonita, 37, who has four children including a college-aged child, provided her perspective, which further provided insight into her lived experience. Bonita went on to explain her belief that
workshops are essential for providing increased learning opportunities, supporting young mothers, and helping them to be engaged in their children’s education. These supplemental tactics are especially important, given that all of the participants are single mothers. In addition, provided that Bonita has a college-age child, the conclusion could be drawn that the workshops recommended by Bonita would have been of great value to her when she was younger. Bonita stated:

I would definitely love to see in our school system where there's less events like Daddy Day. Not saying that it's not good, but I will like to see more of workshops for parents, teaching these young women, teaching mothers how to be engaged in school. I am cool for the Daddy and Donuts, but could there be a workshop at the same time that's teaching Dad how important it is to be engaged with the homework instead of mom. Or how important it is to read to the child at this certain amount of time. Some people just don't know. It's a platform to get other things going but I think teaching more parents is so needed in the system.

Similarly, Cheryl provided feelings of optimism regarding the significance of workshops for families, positing the following:

Like she said, get workshops for these parents. Because if you get the workshops…get workshops to help us. To get us more involved or try to find different things that we could do to help our child's education. Having the workshops is, I think, is really important. We don't all have all the answers. You go to a workshop, I'm pretty sure 10 of us might learn
something like, "yo, I never knew that. I'm glad I came to this workshop…
now we can start doing this, this ..."

Monique, also stated: “Yeah, I agree! A variety of different workshops but
making it available outside of work hours.” Monique expressed her belief that schools
must be cognizant of, and take steps to minimize, the possibility that families’ often rigid
job schedule may conflict with school activities, compounding any previously stated
barriers identified by participants. In the following quote, Leandra expressed her
rationale for seeking to help families by ensuring that workshops are scheduled at a
variety of times: “It's hard for a parent, especially if they're working a regular nine to five
job whatever the case may be, to be able to come to these things [workshops], and I'm
sure that they want to.”

Supporting the development of workshops as learning opportunities for
effectively engaging families, Lauren advocated:

Just making sure that there's enough events held, or workshops or
whatever so that these parents can choose what works for them, what's
their schedule, or what's more engaging to them, or their child or a need
for their family. I think that would help.

Participants cited the need for workshops as a way for schools to increase
engagement among families, despite some of the aforementioned challenges regarding
flexibility. Participants sought to ensure that workshops built upon the parents’ capacity
to positively impact their child’s educational experience. Recognizing and addressing the
specific needs of the participants, workshops were deemed to be more effective than
other approaches that solely prioritized un-sustained social activities or intentions.
However, the attendance of workshops does not remain the sole solution to improving engagement with these families. Schools must consider alternative methods of ensuring families capitalize on enriching workshops that may be offered.

**Innovative Use of Technology.** Nearly all of the participants cited the innovative use of technology as an effective strategy for maximizing parental engagement. Particularly, participants elaborated on the ways in which families who are unable to become active within their child’s school benefit from innovative technologies, such as: educational mobile applications, email communication, and “video streaming.” The use of technology endows participants with a previously unavailable variety of avenues for remaining engaged. Given the barriers that limit the ability for families to be engaged within the schools, participants also praised the added flexibility and convenience of communicating with teachers for pertinent information about their child’s educational progress, positing that they believed it would positively impact engagement outcomes. Lauren, whose experiences included the use a form of innovative technology with her school, highlighted how the new technology has assisted her in managing, monitoring, and supporting her child’s education. Lauren affirmed:

I like that they are these new programs [mobile applications] now where like I can see my daughter's grades instantly and there's text messages where I will see what her homework assignments is so, right away, I'll know to check up on her. "Did you finish this, did you complete this? I always worked a lot and that kind of hindered me being as responsive to my children's issues in schools as I would want to be. So, this new technology, I know has helped me a lot. I'm able to be right on top of my
child and making sure her assignments are done, whatever. Instead of waiting until these interims or quarterly reports to find out, "Oh, you've been handed six assignments." Or, "You're struggling in this area."

Sometimes you don't know until it's too late, so, I feel like that's a help.

Lauren found the technology to be useful in monitoring her daughter’s progress. By receiving notifications and messages alerting her of her child’s academic progress, Lauren is able to intercede in a timely manner in areas where challenges arise. These opportunities are not available with the use conventional methods of communicating with families.

Similarly, Cheryl explained how a mobile application increased her knowledge about the day-to-day activities of her child’s conduct in school and helped her to maintain communication with the teacher.

For my kid's school, I'm pretty sure for the school it's called something, MobyMax and it's an email you have to set up that, with each teacher they'll let you know how the kid's day is going. "Your child was having a bad day, had an attitude this morning, had a better day, we're doing this, project is due."

On the contrary, Victoria’s experience was less than favorable with her child’s school, where families have the ability to engage via a mobile application. Although she recognizes the value of access to her child's progress, the technology is not as user-friendly as she had hoped. Victoria stated that: “for my kid's school it is effective. They use class dojos, so I download the app. Maybe it's
just me. It's not that easy to use.” Therefore, Victoria requires additional support in order to ensure that she becomes proficient at utilizing it.

Other participants describe the use of email technology as most effective to the degree in which they sought to engage. Particularly, Ramona, a 55 year old mother of a 10th grader, is satisfied with email communication, explaining her experience accordingly,

The emails, they work. Or at least, I guess we could have email or text. I choose email, but I get emails daily. Well, they're constantly emailing me.

"Come to this. Come to that. There's Parent University. There's a PTA meeting." They really do make an attempt to get the word out.

However, some disadvantages became apparent with regard to accepting email as a primary means of communicating with families. To this point, Ramona added, “sometimes, its [email] almost too much and they did explain to me that sometimes they over email because sometimes you only look at the first thing.” Ramona has a pre-established level of engagement in her child’s school. As such, email communication is a supplemental strategy for engaging Ramona in much the same way that other participants described their effective use of mobile applications.

However, many of the participants identified the use of “video streaming” as an effective means to engaging families with the school. In response to the barriers that limit the participants’ engagement in school-based events, such as job and school schedule conflicts as previously described, participants believed that, although the development and implementation of workshops are essential, challenges to attend would
still exist. The limitations to gaining valuable resources from these learning opportunities would most impact families who are typically unable to participate.

Video streaming was understood by the participants as a practical method of providing participants with remote access to the events occurring at their child’s school. Four participants suggested video streaming events and workshops as an effective strategies to be adopted by schools. Participants Leandra and Monique championed video streaming as an effective method for helping address the varied needs of working parents. On several occasions, these ladies shared their experiences with the challenges of extensive work hours while struggling to participate within the school. Specifically, Leandra stated: “The days already are long, and the school days are long, the work days are long so.”

Therefore, as it related to video streaming as a strategy, they believe that the method must be inclusive of working families by accommodating their diverse schedules. Monique offered, “I think something like a [video] thing so [that] you can be at home watching it and being engaged while your child is doing their homework or [you’re] cooking or something like that is helpful.” Monique’s perspective belied her feelings regarding her time constraints. Leandra, responded “Just having different avenues, different ways that, for someone that has to work, can see [school events]. Like streaming, I think that would be a good one.” Monique and Leandra’s lived experience suggested that they would significantly benefit from the use of video streaming to meet their engagement needs while tending to their children at home.

Similarly, when Laura expressed the need for learning opportunities in the form of workshops, she also advocated for increasing access in order to increase engagement.
Video streaming in real time is beneficial to families who have the ability to access workshops and other events at the same time. However, Lauren further suggested that added consideration ought to be given to families who are able view the workshops. Therefore, any video streaming strategies employed by schools should include a video archive to which families of students may be granted access. On this matter, Laura stated:

Making sure that that event is available, not just at that time of the event, but maybe on the school's website, for that to be streamed for that parent who couldn't come, but she could tap into that ... She could watch that at home.

Likewise, Bonita advocated for the innovative use of technology. To this end, Bonita suggested:

If they [schools] start to utilize the computers more, like how we have meetings where we can see each other? Yeah, like a conference call type of situations. Even with that, say a PTA meeting for people that can't make it, let that be an option. There's so many different ways.

From the life experiences of the participants and the data, emerged the need for schools to consider the innovative use of technology in order to foster family engagement. Participants described how technology can aid them with many of the challenges faced when seeking to engage in the educational experiences of their children. Participants pursue a variety of options in which they can best select what is effective in supporting the fulfillment of their roles.
Summary of Results

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of low-income families while gaining an understanding of their perspectives regarding their urban family/school engagement experiences. Furthermore, this study tells the story of these families and identifying the multiple perspectives that inform the development of effective family engagement strategies in urban schools. The three major findings that emerged as a result of the data analysis are as follows: First, low-income families establish significant critical understanding of their child’s need for a positive educational experience and identify several roles to support their children. Second, despite their expressed and demonstrated willingness to be engaged in their child’s educational experience, low-income families identify social factors, such as single parent status and rigid work schedules that impede their ability to further fulfill their role. Finally, as the last major theme to emerge from this researcher’s efforts in this study, the researcher perceives that commonly accepted family engagement strategies too often lack the flexibility needed to overcome the aforementioned restrictive work schedules and are bereft of enriched learning opportunities that would surely not go unutilized by low-income families.

Chapter 5 will explore the implications of this study. In addition, the limitations of this study, as well as recommendations as a result of this study will be discussed.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the researcher’s work to examine the perspectives of low-income families with children in urban schools. Furthermore, discussions on the research findings are provided, with the implications of those findings being explored in this chapter, as well. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the study’s limitations, provide recommendations including the need for future study, and conclusions.

This phenomenological qualitative study investigated the perspectives and lived experiences of low-income families as they pertain to family engagement in urban schools. Urban schools continue to urge active family participation within the school, while families feel that they inadequately factor in the many obvious challenges that make such participation nearly impossible for so many hard-working and well-meaning families. Chief among these difficulties are the economic disparities that impede their ability to participate in school activities (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Lareau, 2000; Smith et al., 2011). Limited research has been dedicated to demonstrating how urban schools can utilize the perspectives of low-income families in order to develop effective family engagement strategies. Even though low-income urban schools implement family engagement strategies, those strategies are often unproven and ineffective.
This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What perspectives do low-income families hold regarding their role in their child’s educational experience?

2. What strategies do low-income families identify as effective to engage them as contributors to their child’s educational experience?

This qualitative data was collected from seven individuals by conducting one focus group interview and one individual interview with low-income families. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants were provided with a detailed description. Additionally, the researcher explained to the prospective participants that consent must be obtained from each participant. Furthermore, the researcher protected the identity of participants and all of the information obtained in the study by adhering to procedures for confidentiality and secure data archival. An in-depth, semi-structured focus group and individual interviews, utilizing an interview protocol of open-ended questions, facilitated the data collection for this study. Moreover, the questions were based on the research questions, family engagement, and low-income urban settings literature.

To fortify this study’s validity, reliability, and credibility, two audio recording devices captured data for the focus group and one-on-one interview. All audio recordings were transcribed, verbatim, by an external consultant. All transcripts were verified against the audio recordings, in order to correct any discrepancies, capture data from cues that were not noted in transcripts, and to ensure accuracy (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In addition, transcriptions were also verified against notes taken by a research assistant.
The exceptional characteristic of phenomenology is the essence of the lived experiences. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research allows for the study of subjects within their natural settings, as an attempt to make sense of the phenomena in terms of ascribed meanings. By capturing low-income families’ encounters with urban schools, this study adopts an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the investigation. Through qualitative analysis of the interview data, the quality of school involvement of low-income families led to the recognition and development of this study’s emergent themes.

**Implications of Findings**

The study’s findings were derived from three themes that emerged from the participants. The themes include: (a) role awareness, (b) “a hard knock life,” and (c) learning opportunities and were further investigated to reveal eight subthemes. Many of the themes and subthemes originated from direct quotes from the participants, aptly conveying powerful meaning, in order to capture the unique lived experiences of the participants. Table 5.1 summarizes the findings addressed by the research questions.

Family engagement in student learning, in general, is an area of opportunity for improvement for most schools. Current research on family engagement indicates its crucial importance in a child’s academic success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, even though research identifies family engagement as a significant component in serving large populations of low-income students (Barnard, 2004; Jeynes, 2012; Jeynes; 2014), urban schools have seemingly squandered a golden opportunity, allowing achievement gaps to widen and academic outcomes to remain regrettably low. Most regrettably, schools seem unwilling to reframe their pursuit of family engagement, such that working
parents, many of them single parents, are equipped with better options for assuming an active role in the education of their children (Watson & Bogotch, 2015). Furthermore, the existing body of literature does little to unearth how urban schools, within low-income communities, might adequately address the unique challenges of improving student academic achievement with a diverse and inclusive array of family engagement methods.

Table 5.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Single mothers in urban communities hold a significant and critical understanding of their role in their child’s positive educational experience and identify several roles to support their children.</td>
<td>Role Awareness</td>
<td>“Be on the Same Page” “Be Present” Academic support</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Despite their expressed and demonstrated willingness to be engaged in their child’s educational experience, urban families identify social factors such as single parent households and lack of job flexibility that impede their ability to further fulfill their role.</td>
<td>“A Hard Knock Life”</td>
<td>“Single Mother” Lack of School and Job Flexibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Family engagement strategies utilized by urban school lack the flexibility of enriched learning opportunities for low-income families.</td>
<td>Learning Opportunities</td>
<td>“Culture of Knowing” “We Need Workshops” Innovative Use of Technology</td>
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The findings that emerged from the data provided further explanation as to why family engagement remains a challenge in low-income urban settings. The findings aligned with literature regarding social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) who defined social capital as the ability of a member of a community to acquire access to resources through established institutionalized relationships or social networks. The acquisition of
access to resources for low-income families who act as the members of urban community, become dependent upon the effectiveness of the engagement strategies of urban schools, the institution. Therefore, the attainment of social capital by low-income families may be limited when strategies are do not enable institutionalized relationships to develop. The study’s implication is woven into each of the study’s three themes and compels the researcher to maintain an understanding of the factors that shape how families do or do not interact in the education of their children.

**Role awareness.** The first category, role awareness, is essential to the study’s participants as it revealed the common consistency among the perspectives of the participants. The participant’s level of role awareness not only determined the extent to which families were cognizant of the roles they play in their children’s education, but this factor also served as a determinant for how the participants enact that understanding. This category captured preconceived notions and beliefs of low-income families regarding school engagement, which is based on the attitudes or perceptions that result in equivalent behaviors.

In relation to family engagement, predispositions are often derived from economic resources, educational knowledge, and experiences with the education system (Grenfell & James, 1998). The significant and critical understanding that low-income families hold, regarding their role in their children’s education, refutes research that has presented outcomes that are contrary to this research. Lareau (1987) emphasized that the perspectives of schools reflect middle-class norms that differ from low-income families, in which schools use the language and codes associated with said norms. Therefore, families of average or higher income status have the ability to better interpret the
language and codes of those norms. Conversely, low-income families hold a different understanding of their role and interpret engagement efforts differently in a manner that they believe to be most suitable for their children (Gonzalez & Jackson, 2013).

Amid the causes for debilitating home-school connections, a lack of consensus regarding how to identify the ways in which low-income families may most effectively impact student achievement. Previous research such as Quiocho and Daoud (2006) reported that teachers perceived families as unreliable and minimally supportive. Furthermore, they concluded that misperceptions of both families and urban schools lead to ineffective partnerships, negatively impacting student academic outcomes. However, they also revealed that families perceived their own desires to participate in their child’s education. Similarly to the research of Quiocho and Daoud (2006), in this study, the participants perceived their own roles to participation and their interpretation of their roles revealed an obligation that, in order for their children to achieve positive educational outcomes, participants sought to maintain specific habits, such as: remaining aligned with the teacher’s classroom goals, being present within the schools, and academically supporting their children at home.

“A hard knock life.” Supporting much of the literature on family engagement in urban schools, all of the participants reported feeling challenged by barriers that inhibit their ability to engage with their children’s schools. Barriers are widespread for urban, low-income, immigrant, minority, and working class families, preventing parents from providing the same level of involvement as those who are not similarly encumbered. (Smith et al., 2011; William & Sanchez, 2011). Low-income families reported and demonstrated a dire willingness to be engaged in their children’s education; however,
they simultaneously emphasized specific social factors like single-parenting and limitations of time. More unique difficulties were cited by the participants in this study, such as: time poverty, a lack of access, a lack of resources, and a lack of awareness (Williams & Sanchez, 2011). The notion of time, or the lack thereof, resonated with all of the participants, as they expressed a sense of insufficient time. According to Auerbach (2007), the challenges faced by families in low-income communities place them at a disadvantage, due to unfair social structures. When combined, these stressors inhibit family engagement in school-based activities, but may result in the overcompensation of home-based engagement discussed in the aforementioned findings.

Being a single-parent, a single mother in particular, often caused participants to feel overwhelmed and discouraged as they struggle to independently manage every aspect of their lives, the lives of their children, and their educational experience, all while prioritizing basic needs. The barriers reported by the participants describe the experiences of heightened stress and pressure associated with being a single mother who is also disadvantaged, socioeconomically. These stressors cause families to deal, sometimes unsuccessfully, with the external issues that indirectly impact their desires to fulfill their role as effectively engaged parents. Furthermore, the complexities of single motherhood, within low-income communities, sometimes prevented the participants from fulfilling their self-appointed parental role.

Surprisingly, despite the many barriers reported by the participants, none of the participants cited low socioeconomic status or scarcity of financial resources as a barrier to parental success.
**Learning opportunities.** Family engagement strategies are generally intended to cultivate and reinforce relationships between families and schools. Because of the perception of ill-conceived and ill-executed policies that fail to consider the difficulties specific to low-income urban families, the participants in this study believed that schools provided inadequate educational opportunities and assistive resources to families in order to better support their children. Webster (2004) suggested that the perspectives of policymakers, regarding families in urban schools, are largely informed by grandiloquence, idealism, and cultural views surrounding their limited conception of family engagement. Family engagement strategies that are employed by urban schools are derived from the views of those who lack basic understanding of the needs associated with low-income communities. Consequently, families are made to feel as though they are under-represented and disregarded when schools develop their engagement strategies.

Participants in this study emphasized their belief that, if presented with appropriate learning opportunities, urban schools would begin to see positive outcomes to improving family engagement. Participants do not offer one-dimensional approaches that solely target families with learning opportunities. The participants also shed insight on the ways schools might provide an environment for school personnel, teachers, and administrators in which they may learn about the low-income communities comprising their student populations and their families.

Previous research purports that many schools display an alarming lack of cultural competence when attempting to engage families in underserved communities. Anderson (1998) suggested that conventional approaches to inspiring engagement ignore culturally-diverse families and continue to threaten opportunities for tangible education through
authentic and empowering participation. Participants emphasized the need for schools to
cultivate a culture that enables school officials to gain cultural competence before
attempting to engage underserved families. The gap between school strategies and their
effectiveness not only belies the efforts of families, but also that of the policymakers and
the administrators carrying out said policies. As a result of many schools’ inability to
appreciate the cultural perspectives of low-income families, and the cultural disparities
wedged between them, participants believed the schools are less relatable.

Additionally, the impact of poor relatability was underscored in the research of
Schultz (2006) who determined that families who develop poor attitudes about urban
schools are less likely to participate, which ultimately manifests into the inability for
families to positively influence their children’s education. While previous research has
shown the positive association between family engagement activities and outcomes on
student learning, concerns are still raised about the traditional paradigms that fail to relate
to contemporary ideals of cultural sensitivity. The participants believed that significant
and targeted training could result in successful outcomes. Moreover, learning
opportunities for urban school officials provide the chance to align their preexisting good
intentions with renewed mindsets, curbing their assumptions regarding what families in
low-income communities want and/or need.

When asked, low-income families expressed a need for more than just social
gatherings at school, yearning for more mentally stimulating experiences. The findings
also lend themselves to the research of Schultz (2006) who espoused the importance of
investigating dialogue that attends to strategies of overcoming failed communication and
involving families, such that they are empowered and receive adequate advocacy.
Keenly aware of their lack of agency in this realm of their lives, and the lives of their children, participants in this study expressed their desire to be further empowered through substantive, family-centered, educational workshops. Seemingly, the attitudes towards workshops supported Epstein (1995), whose framework of six types of parent involvement has become an influential framework for developing family engagement strategies. These strategies include school volunteerism and the use of workshops to engage families. While some participants expressed their willingness to participate in school-based workshops when their work schedules were accommodated, such accommodations were not sufficient to motivate others to participate. Therefore, such approaches continue to place demands on families, as they require often overworked parents to find time to be physically present at school, irrespective of their specific limitations (Bower & Griffin, 2011). Thus, school-based workshops, as a primary strategy, preclude the participation of a plethora of families, withholding access to valuable learning opportunities.

Frankly, families who are unable to gain access to school resources are often unable to support their child’s academic success. Additional insight regarding how to increase family access through the use of technology was gained from the participants. For example, participants in this study suggested that the use of technology like video streaming, email communication, and mobile applications, which empowers and equips families with school resources they might not otherwise obtain. Given the barriers to school participation, study participants also praised the added flexibility and convenience of communicating with teachers about their child’s educational progress, positing that such involvement would positively impact engagement outcomes.
Implications for future research. The participants in this study were from Albany, New York, and the study results are based on the interviews, which contained seven participants from low-income families with children enrolled in K-12 urban schools. The extent to which this study’s findings are held in other settings could be of significant value, if similar research is conducted in different environments.

This study sought to identify the perspectives of family engagement with their child’s urban school from the lived experiences of low-income families. This research provided a qualitative and phenomenological snapshot of family engagement in urban schools (elementary, middle, and high schools), with respect to the type of urban school (traditional public or charter school). Future study might examine whether those viewpoints provided by low-income families in this study apply to the experience of families in various low-income communities from other geographic regions. Moreover, a study that includes examining both the perspectives of low-income families and urban schools may lend to further understanding the phenomena which contributes to the body of literature on family engagement in urban schools.

Additionally, it is important to note the commonality that all of the participants were single mothers. If single motherhood and other barriers are indeed prevalent in low-income communities, future research might seek to further examine how urban schools may support these families and their children within the school.

Research could also examine the student academic outcomes as urban schools address the school-based challenges experienced by low-income families. Subsequent prospective research could include a comparison of student outcomes within in an urban school or urban school district. Furthermore, future researchers seeking to replicate this
study might consider other populations by using a variety of methodologies in order to study low-income families across various geographies and their varied experiences with efforts at family engagement in schools.

**Limitations**

This study examined low-income families’ perspectives on family engagement, as established by their lived experiences with the children’s school. These perspectives serve to help the researcher reform efforts to effectively engaging all families. The findings can be utilized to inform school practices and the implementation of new strategies to increase family engagement at their institutions. Albeit that the findings have added to the existing research on family engagement in urban settings, this study was not without its limitations. Such limitations consist of sample size, geographic location, and the role of the researcher bias.

*Sample size limitation.* Despite the findings being valuable to the existing body of research, the sample size was limited to seven participants. Furthermore, all of the participants were female. In addition, all of the participants were biological mothers of children enrolled in an urban school. Although not a primary goal of qualitative methods, the findings may not extend to male low-income parents or to non-biological adults serving as primary guardians. An increased sample size and diverse group of male and female participants might offer different perspectives, in terms of barriers and the perceived role of families in their child’s education. In the same fashion, all of the participants in this study demonstrated some level of engagement in the educational experience of their children. This study lacked the participation of families who may have little to no involvement in their child’s education experience and/or with the school.
Additionally, the strategies utilized to recruit participants for this study were not without challenges. This study employed an open recruiting approach rather than collaborating directly with school districts in order to disseminate information to their constituents. The approach did not result in significant return of responses. Subsequently, the minimum number of participants for this study was reached 2 months upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board.

**Geographic limitation.** Geographic limitations were presented with this study. All of the participants all lived in the same community and had children enrolled schools within the Albany City School District. Therefore, the findings may not reflect the lived experiences of low-income families from different cities within the region, as well as outside of the Albany city area. Furthermore, due to the limited geographic scope of the study, the findings may not be transferable to other low-income families with children enrolled in schools in urban communities.

**Role of the researcher bias.** A phenomenological approach was utilized to explore this study, a method which can invite researcher bias. The researcher is a school administrator in an urban elementary charter school and works with populations similar to the participants in this study. While the researcher took steps to minimize bias, such as utilizing an external peer reviewer and transcription services, all biases may not have been eradicated.

**Recommendations**

This study offers a primary set of recommendations that seeks to make practical use of the findings in this study. These recommendations may provide urban school
administrators, and school district officials, with specific areas in which to focus their efforts in order to effectively engage low-income families.

**Conduct a family engagement needs assessment.** The first recommendation for urban schools is to conduct a thorough family engagement needs assessment of the perspectives of families within the community in which they serve. Based on the finding that low-income families hold a significant understanding of the role in their child’s education and identified various roles such as being on the same page as school personnel, being present, and providing academic support, it is imperative for schools to prioritize embracing their understanding.

Families in low-income settings vary in how they express their engagement with urban schools based largely on how they understand their role. A systematic process for investigating the population and/or community enables urban schools to assess the state of resources such as knowledge, abilities, interests of families, and approaches relevant to a focus on families’ intentionality. According to Grenfell & James (1998), predispositions are often derived from economic resources, educational knowledge, and experiences with the education system. By conducting a family engagement needs assessment, schools may collect information about the targeted community, decide what resources currently exist and what needs are being met, and further determine what needs remain unmet.

Several methods may be employed when conducting a family engagement assessment. These methods should include conducting focus groups, community meetings, individual interviews, and administering surveys in order to gain robust information from low-income families. The use of focus groups containing a small
sample of families as well as individual interviews would be helpful to urban schools to gather specific in-depth perspectives of their roles and the manner in which families fulfill them. The interview protocol for this study can be utilized as a guide or modified to conduct interviews. Community meetings held outside of the school may not provide in-depth information as focus groups, however, may be useful in obtaining information from larger groups. Surveying families, whether paper-based or electronically, can further provide urban schools with data which statistically summarizes the perspectives of low-income families. The methods for conducting a family engagement needs assessment can not only obtain the thoughts, feelings, and opinions families in the community but also provide insight on the factors such as single parenting that influence how families determine which engagement role is most suitable for their children.

As noted in this study, families hold a critical, if not, a uniquely individual understanding of their role in their child’s educational experience given the social factors that obstruct their ability to be engaged with the traditional approaches. Therefore, a family engagement needs assessment enables schools to further place an emphasis on ensuring that proposed strategies are responsive to the data obtained.

*Strengthen school and individual level cultural competence.* The second recommendation for urban schools is to utilize data collected from a family engagement needs assessment to strengthen cultural competence at the school and individual levels. In this study, the participants felt that schools needed to establish a “culture of knowing,” providing the perspective that schools lack cultural competence when engaging with families in underserved communities. Particularly, emphasis was placed on the need for schools to obtain a profound understanding of the context of students, families, and the
community at large if they seek to enliven families. This study suggests school administrators seek to increase cultural mindfulness by considering the composition of the community which may help to lessen the gap between the strategies developed and their effectiveness.

First, urban schools should seek to develop a vision statement which articulates the intentionality of cultivating a culturally competent school which promotes a philosophy of inclusiveness and acceptance. Participants in this study expressed how the schools’ deliberate attention to prioritizing an increase in their knowledge of the demography must be inclusive of all stakeholders; families, students, teachers, administrators, community members, etc.

Upon developing a vision statement, schools may benefit from conducting a schoolwide cultural audit. A cultural audit may also include surveys and staff feedback along with reviewing key practices and policies in order to further measure the baseline of cultural competency. The outcomes of a cultural audit may help school to pinpoint key strengths and opportunities for improvement with the purpose of developing goal in the framework of a cultural competence vision statement.

Secondly, schools should seek to maintain regular professional development on cultural diversity and family engagement for their staff. Participants believed that in order for their child’s schools to establish effective engagement strategies, developing new learning opportunities for school personnel was essential. The participants’ perceived absence or lack of cultural competency developed a feeling that families were not made to feel genuinely received. Furthermore, leaving families with the impression that they are unable to relate with schools.
Training opportunities for staff should include authentic dialogues facilitated with the objective of dispelling possible predispositions regarding low-income families and the communities in which they live. Barriers to increased family engagement can be the result of a difference in nonmatching cultures, conflicting perspectives, family constraints, values, and/or beliefs. In order to aid in alleviating some of the seeming barriers wedged between the perspectives of families and educators, trainings may also include pairing staff with families to not only seek an understanding among them but also improve relations. Participants believed that, if provided with adequate professional development and training, teachers and staff are able to improve their instruction to students and their interactions with families. Toward this end, increased cultural competence will better facilitate the opportunity for urban schools to learn, to collaborate with low-income families, and to improve the state of affairs of family engagement.

**Establish family learning communities.** The final recommendation implores urban schools to establish family learning communities. Family learning communities convey the importance of building families’ capacity in the educational process. This recommendation would seek to equip and empower families with meaningful learning opportunities in which participants believed were necessary and deemed most enriching. Particularly, families expressed their aspirations of family-centered educational workshops that provide increased exposure and access to valuable resources and innovation. Based on the findings, it behooves urban schools to consider providing pertinent learning opportunities built on topics of interest suggested by families.

Family learning communities should consist of content-specific workshops that enable families to gain a deepened understanding and obtain actual skills as how to
further support their children’s learning. Specifically, educational offerings may include, for example, supporting families in dissecting learning standards and providing them with approaches to help their children meet learning outcomes. Family learning communities should not be limited to solely addressing academic related matters. Additional objectives might include connecting families with community resources to aid in addressing social challenges as noted by participants. Urban schools may seek to have workshops facilitated by teachers, school administrators, or experts within the communities. However, this study further suggests urban schools to consider alternative methods of increasing families’ accessibility to family learning communities as in-school workshops may still be met with weakened attendance.

Equally important, is the adoption of the innovative use of technology. Participants described how technology can aid them with many of the challenges faced when seeking to fulfill their roles engaging in the educational experiences of their children. Low-income families are challenged by exhaustive work schedules, a lack of access, and a lack of resources (Hill & Taylor, 2004; William & Sanchez, 2011). As such, urban school administrators should augment the efforts of families by applying technology to facilitate consistent communication, manage coursework, and provide in-service training.

This study suggests the development of technology-based family learning communities in which resources such as video of workshops or webinars may be streamlined, disseminated, archived, and accessible to families. Given the barriers that limit the ability for families to be engaged within the schools, participants in this study also praised the added flexibility and convenience of utilizing technology to obtain
school-related information from remote locations such as their homes. Offering this alternative method helps to support families already feel stressed with existing parental responsibilities without the need to be engaged physically within their child’s school.

**Conclusion**

Much of the research on family engagement is associated with improving student outcomes. However, more research must examine how urban schools might utilize research-based knowledge, from the perspectives of low-income families, in order to inform and bolster the development and implementation effective engagement strategies. Although urban schools attempt to implement family engagement strategies, the strategies they favor are often found to be ineffective (Hill & Taylor, 2004; William & Sanchez, 2011). Federal, state, and local district policies routinely discount the unique needs of low-income families and communities (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). As a result, the manner in which urban schools attempt to connect with and engage low-income families remains one of the main causes of their plight.

This qualitative phenomenological study has provided a snapshot of the lived perspectives of a sample of low-income families in Albany, New York. More specifically, this study focused on levels of family engagement in urban schools. This study’s researcher, a school administrator, brought over 10 years of experience in urban education to the study, as well as a strong desire to significantly improve family engagement in urban communities. The study was guided by two research questions, which are as follows:

1. What perspectives do low-income families hold regarding their role in their child’s educational experience?
2. What strategies do low-income families identify as effective to engage them as contributors to their child’s educational experience?

The design of the study utilized qualitative phenomenological research methods for data collection, including: demographic profile questionnaires, a semi-structured focus group interview, a semi-structured one-on-one interview, and field notes. The focus group interview called for semi-structured, open-ended questions aligned to the research questions in order to perceive and appreciate the specific lived experiences of low-income families with regard to family engagement in their child’s urban school.

Upon the completion of research, the study yielded findings in three areas:

1. Single mothers in urban communities hold a critical and significant understanding of their role in their child’s positive educational experience and clearly identify key roles to supporting the children.

2. Despite their expressed and demonstrated willingness to be engaged in the child’s education, urban families identify social factors such as single parenthood and lack of job flexibility that further impede their ability to be engaged.

3. Family engagement strategies utilized by urban schools lack the flexibility of enriched learning opportunities for families.

While implications for improved policies and school improvement can be drawn from this study, generalizability is not feasible. However, this research has the potential to inform the best practices of urban schools, while inspiring the development and implementation of new family engagement strategies in urban schools.
References


Appendix A

Demographic Profile Questionnaire

“Understanding Family Engagement Experiences of Families in Urban Schools:
A Focus Group Perspective”

Demographic Survey

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<td>D9. How many children (under 18 years old) are in the household?</td>
<td>□ 1. One (1) □ 2. Two (2) □ 3. Three or more (3+) □ 4. I’d rather not say</td>
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<td>D10. How many of your children attend a public school?</td>
<td>□ 1. One (1) □ 2. Two (2) □ 3. Three or more (3+) □ 4. I’d rather not say</td>
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<td>D13. Would you want to be contact for future opportunities?</td>
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Appendix B

Consent for Participation

“Understanding Family Engagement Experiences of Families in Urban Schools: A Focus Group Perspective”
St. John Fisher College – School of Education

Consent for Participation

Researcher: Don Applyrs (518-701-1912), St. John Fisher College, 3690 East Avenue, Rochester, New York 14618.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the lived family engagement experiences and perspectives of low-income families. This study will seek to tell the story of low-income families and identify how these perspectives may inform the development of urban school family engagement strategies.

Procedures: Your participation in this study will consist of engaging in a brief survey to gain background information (age, gender, household size, etc.). The survey will be followed by a small group discussion. During the focus group, I will be asking questions about your thoughts on your perspective of your child’s school and your experiences with which the school engages you in your child’s education.

All focus group participants will be audiotape recorded to ensure accuracy of responses in transcription. Once the transcription is complete, the tape recordings from this study will be destroyed. The electronic transcription files will not contain references to your identifying information. The survey and group discussion should not take longer than 90 minutes. If a question is not clear, please say so, and I’ll be glad to ask it in a different way. We will notify the group when our time is nearly up and ask for final comments and/or reflections on our discussion.

Voluntary Nature of this Research: Your decision about your participation in this research study will have no effect on your child or their status at their current school. There are no wrong answers in this interview. We will not be grading or judging your reactions. You are not required to respond to any of the questions. If you do not wish to answer a question, you need only say so. There will be no personal identifying information attached to your responses or recorded on any research documentation.
Limitations: Participation in this study is limited to families with children enrolled in the Albany City, Troy City and Schenectady City school districts.

Risks: There is some risk that you may become uncomfortable answering these questions. If at any point you become uncomfortable, you can take a break, stop altogether, or contact someone you’d like to speak to. It’s also okay to skip a question if you don’t want to answer it for any reason. Let the interviewer know right away if you want to take a break or stop completely.

Benefits: There is no direct benefit to participants but it is hoped that this study will provide important information about the manner in which urban schools and may improve services for your youth.

Compensation: Families will be given a $10 gift card for their participation in the survey and focus group.

Assurance of Confidentiality: All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the Institutional Review Board, the sponsor of the study (e.g. NIH, FDA, etc.) and University or governmental officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records. University and professional policy requires the researchers to make an exception to these confidentiality procedures in the case of 1) previously unreported potential to harm oneself or others; and 2) previously unreported child abuse or neglect.

Since at a focus group other people are present, and the focus group takes place at the program site, we cannot fully guarantee your confidentiality. We will not disclose your identity or share anything said in this meeting with anyone else. Please do not discuss anything about the group outside of the meeting, including names of other participants and anything we talk about. We cannot guarantee that every group member will follow this recommendation.

The results from this study will be reported for the purpose of this research proposal. The results may also be presented at future conferences. Your identity in the study will not be disclosed. During the focus group discussion, please try to refrain from using names or any identifying information. If any first names come up during the focus group, they will be changed to an alias (false name) in the transcription for the protection of confidentiality.

Contact Information: If you have any questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Don Applyrs at (518) 701-1912 or email dma03623@sjfc.edu. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed and approved this research proposal. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the research or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, please call Jill Rathbun (585) 385-8012. She will direct your call to a member of the Institution Review Board at St. John Fisher College. You may also email the St. John Fisher College Institution Review Board at irb@sjfc.edu.

I consent to be interviewed by the researcher team at the School of Education, St. John Fisher College. I understand that I have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.
Participant’s Signature: _____________________________________

Participation in the focus group constitutes consent.
Appendix C

Focus Group Interview Questions

**Perspective of role**
1. From your point of view, what do you understand your role to be in your child’s education?

2. Describe the ways you support your child’s education.

3. In what ways, if any, do you feel your child’s school has influenced how you view or understand your role your child’s education in their education?

4. In your opinion, do you believe that families and family engagement are a priority in your child’s school? Explain.

**School strategies**
1. Describe the ways in which you believe, in anyway, your child’s school attempts to offer families the opportunity participate in within the school and contribute to their child’s educational experiences.
   a. Please describe how effective or ineffective are those methods in helping you to further contribute to your child’s education.

2. Describe what barriers, if any that may limit your participation in your child’s educational experience.
   a. How does the school take these challenges into consideration to work with you and your child?

3. Describe the ways in which you believe, in anyway, your child’s school attempts to offer families the opportunity to support and contribute to their child’s educational experiences outside of school.
   a. Please describe how effective or ineffective are those methods in helping you to further contribute to your child’s education.

4. Based on your experiences with your child’s school, what suggestions would you make to best engage and involve you in your child’s education?

**Relationship with school**
1. When you have a concern about your child’s school experience, can you describe how comfortable are you addressing the matter with a member of the school’s staff?

2. Please describe whether or not you have a trusting relationship with a member of the school’s staff?

3. Based on your experiences with your child’s school, what suggestions would you make to further improve the relationship between the school and your family?
Appendix D

IRB Certificate

COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM)
COMPLETION REPORT - PART 1 OF 2
COURSEWORK REQUIREMENTS*

*NOTE: Scores on the Reporting Report reflect quiz completions at the time all requirements for the course were met. See list below for details. See separate Training Report for more recent quiz scores, including those on optional (supplemental) course elements.

- Name: DonLee Apllys (ID: 5793636)
- Email: dmsol36@jiggi.edu
- Institution Affiliation: St John Fisher College (ID: 3316)
- Institution Unit: Education - Ed.D in Executive Leadership
- Curriculum Group: Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher
- Course Learner Group: Social & Behavioral Research
- Stage: Stage 1 - Basic Course

- Report ID: 20440450
- Completion Date: 22-Aug-2016
- Expiration Date: 22-Aug-2018
- Minimum Passing: 80
- Reported Score*: 94

REQUISITED AND ELECTIVE MODULES ONLY

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COMPLETION REPORT - PART 2 OF 2
COURSEWORK TRANSCRIPT**

** NOTE: Scores on this Transcript Report reflect the most current quiz completions, including quizzes on optional (supplemental) elements of the course. See list below for details. See separate Requirements Report for the reported scores at the time all requirements for the course were met.

- Name: Don-Lee Acelyn (ID: 5706338)
- Email: damacelyn@sfu.ca
- Institution Affiliation: St. John Fisher College (ID: 3319)
- Institution Unit: Education - Ed.D. in Executive Leadership
- Curriculum Group: Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher
- Course Learner Group: Social & Behavioral Research
- Stage: Stage 1 - Basic Course

- Report ID: 20484590
- Report Date: 22-Aug-2015
- Current Score**: 94

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Appendix E

Saint John Fisher College IRB Approval Letter

August 8, 2017

File No: 3767-072017-04

Don Lee M. Applyrs
St. John Fisher College

Dear Mr. Applyrs:

Thank you for submitting your research proposal to the Institutional Review Board.

I am pleased to inform you that the Board has approved your Expedited Review project, “Family Engagement: The Perspectives of Low-Income Families on the Engagement Strategies of Urban Schools.”

Following federal guidelines, research related records should be maintained in a secure area for three years following the completion of the project at which time they may be destroyed.

Should you have any questions about this process or your responsibilities, please contact me at irb@sjfc.edu.

Sincerely,

Eileen Lynd-Balta, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board
ELB: jdr