Engaging Parents of 8th Grade Students in Parent/Teacher Bidirectional Communication

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St. John Fisher College

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Abstract
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Engaging Parents of 8th Grade Students in Parent/Teacher Bidirectional Communication

By

Waveline Bennett-Conroy

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

Supervised by
Constance W. Iervolino, Ed.D.

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Biographical Sketch

Waveline Bennett-Conroy is currently Director of Pupil Personnel Services at the Mount Vernon City School District, Mount Vernon, New York. Ms. Bennett-Conroy attended the Jamaica College of Agriculture, Science, and Education from 1972 to 1976 and graduated with a Bachelor degree with a Science Major in 1976. She attended the University of the West Indies from 1976 to 1978 and graduated with a Master of Arts in Foreign Language degree in 1978. She attended Fordham University from 1992 to 1996 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Computer Science in 1995 and a Master of Arts degree in Sociology in 1996. She attended the College of New Rochelle from 2002 to 2005 and graduated with a Master of Science degree in Educational Administration and Supervision in 2005. She began doctoral studies at the St. John Fisher College Program in Executive Leadership at the College of New Rochelle campus in 2009. Ms. Bennett-Conroy pursued her research in parent involvement in their children’s education under the direction of Dr. Constance W. Iervolino and Dr. John J. Koster and received the Ed.D. degree in August, 2011.
Abstract

The study purpose was to develop and evaluate a low-cost school-based intervention to increase parents’ involvement in their children’s education. Although parent involvement is associated with increased student educational achievement, many children who most need effective parent involvement support do not receive it. In Phase 1 of the study, 17 parents of 8th grade students in a low-income, immigrant, minority school district were interviewed to conduct a qualitative assessment of factors for lack of effective parent involvement and to assess the feasibility and acceptability of the planned intervention. In Phase 2 of the study, 192 students in nine 8th grade English classes were given weekly homework assignments for seven weeks that required parent/child interaction to complete the assignment. Three of these classes were randomly selected to receive teacher outreach to initiate parent/teacher bidirectional communication with students’ parents. The main hypothesis was that teachers would have bidirectional conversations of at least five minutes duration with a greater proportion of intervention class parents than with control class parents. Additional hypotheses were that intervention class students would submit more homework assignments and have higher homework grades than control class students. These hypotheses were confirmed by chi-square analysis, p < .001. The study demonstrated that a low-cost intervention to improve parent involvement at-home and at-school among 8th grade students is feasible, acceptable to all stakeholders, and effective. Since the federal No Child Left Behind Act prioritizes greater parent/teacher bidirectional communication, policy makers may be interested in supporting this intervention.
# Table of Contents

Biographical Sketch ................................................................................. ii

Abstract .................................................................................................. iii

Table of Contents ................................................................................... iv

List of Tables ........................................................................................... vi

List of Figures .......................................................................................... vii

Chapter 1: Introduction ............................................................................ 1

  Statement of the Problem ..................................................................... 1
  Theoretical Rationale .......................................................................... 4
  Significance of the Study ..................................................................... 5
  Purpose of the Study ............................................................................ 7
  Research Question ............................................................................... 7
  Definitions of Terms .......................................................................... 7
  Summary of Remaining Chapters ....................................................... 9

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature .............................................................. 11

  Introduction and Purpose ................................................................... 11
  Topic Analysis .................................................................................... 11
  Summary and Conclusion ................................................................... 25

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology ..................................................... 26

  General Perspective .......................................................................... 26
  Research Context ............................................................................... 28
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1</td>
<td>District Middle School Student Population Demographic Data</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.2</td>
<td>Parent Intervention Project Student Demographic Data</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
<td>Parent/Teacher Bidirectional Communication</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.2</td>
<td>Parent/Teacher Any Contact</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.3</td>
<td>Homework Assignment Submissions</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.4</td>
<td>Homework Assignment Grades</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.5</td>
<td>Parent Night Attendance</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.1</td>
<td>Interventions to Increase Parent Involvement and Improve Student Achievement</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.2</td>
<td>Hoover-Dempsey Model for Parent Involvement</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.3</td>
<td>Mapp Hypothesis on Parent Involvement at School</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Across the United States, there are millions of underachieving students. Although parent involvement is associated with higher levels of student achievement, low-cost evidence-based interventions to increase effective parent involvement have not been developed for use by low-resource school districts. This dissertation study developed and evaluated a low-cost intervention to promote effective parent involvement among parents of 8th grade students in a low-resource, immigrant, minority school district.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed by this research project is that although parents’ involvement (PI) in their children’s schooling is associated with increased student educational achievement, many children who most need effective PI support do not receive it. PI initiatives in low-resource, immigrant, minority school districts often fail to engage a significant percentage of parents as partners in working to improve their children’s education. This dissertation study contributes to knowledge and practice because a) it fills a void in existing PI research by quantitatively evaluating an intervention to promote PI and b) it informs practice on PI.

Many studies and reviews of the literature have argued that increased PI is associated with improved student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Epstein et al., 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Simonson-Morton & Crump, 2003; Jeynes, 2005; Hill & Tyson, 2009). A study by Parcel and Dufur
(2001) of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that parent/teacher communication was positively associated with increased reading scores among children in grades 1-8. Although strategies for increasing PI have been published (Henderson et al., 2007; Epstein et al., 2009), there has been little quantitative evaluation of these approaches, and these strategies are designed to be implemented at district-wide or school-wide levels. In an overview of the PI field, Agronick and colleagues (2009) stated, “There is little evidence that parent involvement strategies succeeded in increasing parent engagement” (p. 23). Their survey of nine school districts in four Northeastern states, including New York, found that parent involvement programs “did not necessarily target parent populations that have been difficult to engage or whose children may be at higher academic risk” (p. ii). They concluded:

Choices of what to implement to engage parents of students in middle school, and especially in high school, are limited by a lack of evidence of what works once students leave elementary school. … the literature revealed a dearth of rigorous evaluation studies of the effectiveness of parent involvement strategies (p. 23).

Moreover, the financial cost and personnel time requirements for district-wide and school-wide interventions are so great that they dissuade low-resource districts and schools from undertaking them.

Existing models used to explain parent motivation for PI have been developed with studies of parents who are already identified as involved in PI activities at their children’s schools. For example, the leading PI theoretical model has been developed by Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005), who state:
… we have focused on parents who are involved, in whatever degree, in their children’s education. Our broader interests, of course, include all parents, because parents are an integral, usually primary, part of the social context that influences their children’s educational outcomes. In fact, we strongly suggest that the model itself offers strong support for theory- and research-based interventions designed to test approaches to encouraging parents who have not been involved in their children’s education to become so. However, to learn more about our interest in parents’ motivations for involvement and the mechanisms that might explain their influence on students, we began with parents who were involved. This limits the generalizability of our review findings (p. 124).

Although a few qualitative studies have sought to interview parents identified by staff of their children’s schools as uninvolved or ineffectively involved (Lawson, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999), the findings of these studies have not been used to develop quantitatively evaluated interventions to promote PI among these parents.

The researcher is an administrator in a low-resource, low-income, minority school district in lower Westchester County, New York, that has had underachieving secondary schools for several decades. Based upon factors such as attendance at parent/teacher nights and at PTA meetings, the predominant perception among secondary school teachers and administrators is that the large majority of parents are not involved in their children’s educations. The intent of this dissertation study was to interview parents identified as uninvolved by school staff, and to use the findings of these interviews to plan and quantitatively evaluate a low-cost intervention that would engage these parents as partners in promoting their children’s academic achievement.
Theoretical Rationale

The PI literature includes a well-articulated theoretical model. Using a psychological approach derived from Bandura (1986; 1997), Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (1995; 1997; 2005) argue that PI is motivated by two belief systems: (a) how parents construct their role for PI - defined as parents’ beliefs concerning what they should do and how they should do it, and (b) parents’ beliefs in how effective they can be in helping their children succeed in school - defined as their beliefs in their ability to produce the desired outcome. The model holds that both belief systems are socially constructed, and hence can be influenced by interventions to promote new beliefs about what parents should do, how they should do it, and how effective their efforts will be. In addition to role construction and self-efficacy, the model argues that PI is also promoted by PI invitations from the school, teachers, and parent’s child. The model explains the positive effects of the particular parent involvement intervention of Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) (Epstein et al., 2009), by pointing out that invitations by the teacher and child to assist with homework create an expectation that parent homework involvement is desirable and normative since all parents are asked to assist with homework. TIPS provides guidance on how the parent should assist with homework, and the successful completion of the interactive homework assignment gives the parent a sense of confidence and mastery in being involved in promoting their child’s educational achievement. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues argue that PI is influenced by a component of self efficacy: perceived life context – defined as parents’ beliefs as to whether they have sufficient time and energy for PI, parent awareness of PI opportunities at the school, and parent skills and abilities sufficient to communicate with the teacher.
and with child about schoolwork. (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005)

A limitation with the Hoover-Dempsey model is that it is missing a PI variable that Mapp (2003) found to be crucial: the parent’s perception that school staff are caring and can be trusted. Mapp conducted a qualitative study of a high-functioning Boston elementary school that included in-depth interviews with 18 involved parents. The parents Mapp interviewed said that they were involved at the school because they felt respected, they felt that the staff cared about their children, and they felt that they could trust the staff.

The PI literature distinguishes between at-home PI, such as discussing school activities, helping with homework, monitoring the use of out-of-school time, or taking children to community cultural events; and at-school PI, such as contacts with school staff, volunteering at the school, or attending school events. (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Trusty, 1999)

This study used the theoretical constructs of role construction, self-efficacy, invitations, perceptions of school staff as caring and trustworthy, at-home PI, and at-school PI to conduct qualitative interviews with parents identified by school staff as not engaged in at-school PI. The purposes of the interviews were to understand current PI attitudes and practices, identify barriers to PI, and develop ideas for improving PI.

Significance of the Study

PI is associated with student achievement. However, there is little quantitative evidence on how to best promote effective PI among middle school students, particularly with previously uninvolved parents and in low-resource school districts. There are
millions of under-achieving students in the United States. If PI does promote student achievement, then an effective low-cost classroom-level intervention to initiate PI among parents of under-achieving students would be of considerable interest to practitioners.

The research problem has scholarly significance as well as practical significance. There are groups of researchers who have argued that although PI is associated with student achievement, the hypothesis that PI causally promotes student achievement has not been adequately supported by rigorous quantitative research (Agronick, Clark, O’Donnell, & Stueve, 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). The identification of an effective low-cost specific intervention to promote PI at the classroom level would simplify the task of designing and implementing a longitudinal study of the hypothesis that PI promotes student achievement.

Although all policy makers endorse PI, many schools and school districts do not do much more than advertise parent/teacher nights unless grant-funding is available to support staff dedicated to PI. The researcher of this study supervises the single district-wide Parent Liaison in a district of 8,000 students. Some teachers in the district conduct individual outreach to some parents, but many do not. If a specific low-cost PI promotion practice could be found to positively influence PI, and in a longitudinal study beyond the time limits of the present study, be found to positively influence student achievement, then there would be reason to implement district-wide policies that required PI promotion for all students and over the long term.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to develop and evaluate a low-cost intervention to increase parent involvement in their children’s education with previously unengaged parents.

Research Question

The primary research question for this study was: Can a low-cost intervention consisting of a focused teacher outreach effort and the use of student/parent interactive homework assignments succeed at initiating bidirectional parent/teacher communication with previously uninvolved parents of 8th grade students in a largely immigrant, minority school district?

Definitions of Terms

*Parent involvement* is defined and conceptually organized many different ways within the PI literature. A commonly used conceptual framework developed by Epstein defines six general types of PI: (a) parenting (educational expectations, supervising time use); (b) communicating (parent or school initiated contacts about academic performance); (c) supporting school (volunteering); (d) learning at home (academic lessons, music lessons, discussions about school); (e) decision making (PTA involvement); and (f) collaborating with community (museum visits, girl scouts) (Epstein et al., 2009). Caution may be required in using this framework for research. Catsambis (1998) utilized the Epstein framework to examine data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS : 88) of 13,580 parents whose children remained in school from 8th grade through 12th grade, and found a strong association between parental expectations and student achievement, and no association between supervision of time
use and student achievement. Similarly, Chen and Gregory (2010) surveyed and interviewed 59 low-achieving racially diverse 9th grade students and found that parental expectations were associated with higher grade point averages, and that parental participation in activities at school was not associated with higher grade point averages. In other words, specific PI activities within a general PI category, or across PI categories, may have different relationships with student achievement. A second common organizing framework distinguishes between PI at-home such as discussing school activities and longer-term educational plans, or monitoring out of school activities, and PI at-school such as contacts with school staff, visiting classes, volunteering, or attending school events (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Trusty, 1999). In general, the PI literature categorizes PI at three levels: (a) a specific PI activity, such as supervising time spent on homework; (b) any one of a specific type of PI activities, such as any at-home parenting activity related to education; and (c) any PI activity at all, such as any activity in any one of Epstein’s six categories. Within the PI literature, it is rare for PI activities or categories to be defined precisely. For example, parents are said to be involved if they take part in the Parent Teacher Association, rather than if they attend at least three Parent Teacher Association meetings in a single school year.

Phase 2 of this study quantitatively evaluated an intervention that used parent/child interactive homework assignments and teacher-to-parent outreach to promote parent/teacher bidirectional communication. For the purposes of this evaluation, the study used the following definitions:

*Parent:* Biological parent, guardian, other older relative, or substitute named by the parent to work with the student on the homework assignment.
**Teacher outreach:** Effort by the teacher using messages sent home with the child, messages sent by mail or email, or phone calls to request bidirectional communication with the parent.

**Parent/teacher bidirectional communication:** At least five minutes telephone or in-person conversation between the teacher and the parent. The conversational topics were the Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) assignments and the child’s overall progress in the class. For the purpose of this study, this definition does not include school- or teacher-initiated communications that primarily concern deficiencies in behavior or attendance. Parent/teacher bidirectional communication is a specific type of at-school PI.

**Interactive homework assignment:** Students were assigned TIPS homework exercises. TIPS is a widely used PI strategy that requires students and parents to work together to complete weekly homework assignments (Epstein et al., 2009). Assisting with homework is a specific type of at-home PI.

**Low-cost:** The teacher averaged less than 30 minutes per student during the entire intervention on outreach and bidirectional communication. For a class of 24 students, this is 12 hours or less spent on teacher outreach over a seven-week outreach period, or an average of less than two hours per week.

**Summary of Remaining Chapters**

The study was conducted in a low-resource, minority school district with the intention of developing and evaluating a low-cost intervention to increase parents’ at-school involvement in their child’s education with previously unengaged parents. The Chapter 2 literature review provides an overview of the dominant paradigm of PI.
interventions, describes the debate concerning whether the association between PI and student achievement is causal or merely correlational, reviews PI theoretical concepts, describes qualitative studies of PI, examines studies that quantitatively evaluated classroom-level PI interventions, and describes limitations of the PI literature. Chapter 3 presents the study’s mixed methods approach. Theoretical constructs from the PI literature were used to conduct interviews that qualitatively assessed PI attitudes and practices among parents who were not regarded by school staff as being engaged by current school PI promotion activities. Data from this assessment informed a quantitatively evaluated intervention that used parent/child interactive homework assignments and teacher-to-parent outreach to achieve teacher/parent bidirectional communication. All 8th grade English classes taught by three teachers were assigned parent/child interactive homework assignments, and one of each teacher’s classes was randomly selected to receive teacher to parent outreach. Chapter 4 presents findings from the parent interviews and reports the findings that: (a) a significantly greater proportion of parents in classes receiving the teacher outreach had bidirectional communication with the teacher, and (b) students in classes receiving the teacher outreach submitted a significantly greater proportion of their parent/child interactive homework assignments. Chapter 5 recommends the intervention as a low-cost method to initiate effective parent/teacher partnerships in low-resource school districts, and as an intervention that is suitable for long-term evaluation to assess the hypothesis that increasing PI will increase student achievement.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

The dissertation evaluates the use of a classroom-level intervention to promote parents’ involvement (PI) in their children’s education. This chapter will locate this topic within the large PI literature; describe key PI conceptual distinctions and theories; and present and critique qualitative and quantitative studies relevant to this topic. The PI literature describes many factors that may contribute to low PI, including busy family schedules, immigrant families’ lack of familiarity with American culture and school systems, low levels of literacy or formal education as barriers to involvement or homework help, language barriers, concerns about immigration status, lack of transportation, unreliable channels of school/parent communication, parental lack of trust in school staff, parental lack of social capital, limited time and training for school staff to foster PI, and financial costs of initiating and sustaining PI activities. (Agronick et al., 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Payne & Kaba, 2001).

Topic Analysis

Parent involvement and student achievement. After reviewing the PI literature, the researcher developed the flow chart on the following page in Figure 1 to illustrate the pathway by which increasing PI is thought to improve student achievement and behavior (SA).
Figure 2.1. Interventions to Increase PI and Improve SA.

The dissertation literature review will focus on the step from 1 to 2 in Figure 2.1, and not on the more widely researched and debated step from 2 to 3. The literature on the step from 2 to 3 contains two points of view. One position argues that increased PI is associated with improved SA, and that there is preponderance of evidence showing that increasing PI will result in increased SA (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Epstein et al., 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003; Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Jeynes, 2005; Hill & Tyson, 2009). The second position agrees that PI and SA are associated, but argues that the evidence base for concluding that there is a causal relationship is weak (Agronick et al., 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Mattingly et al., 2002). Although understanding the relationship between PI and SA is of great importance, the debate is a moot point for educators of underachieving students if it is not possible to bring about a transition from step 1 to step 2.

Parent involvement intervention scale. PI interventions may take place at district, school, or classroom levels. PI practice and the PI literature have been strongly
influenced by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002. NCLB and Title 1 legislation supported broad-based PI initiatives and research, particularly at the district and school levels. This historical focus is understandable: district and school level interventions intend to reach the largest number of students and families, and a wide menu of PI components will give parents choices, may engage more parents than any single strategy, and may permit matching specific PI components with specific needs of students and parents. At this point in history, the dominant PI paradigm is to provide a comprehensive range of interventions at a district or school level. The leading school- and district-level PI programs recommend the simultaneous use of multiple PI strategies such as special events, volunteer opportunities, parent education, parent centers, and dedicated outreach staff (Henderson et al., 2007; Epstein et al., 2009). However, these large scale interventions present difficulties for both research and practice.

The simultaneous use of multiple interventions to achieve a common outcome makes it difficult to determine the relative effectiveness of each individual intervention. Agronick and colleagues (2009) state:

… there is no evaluation evidence on which practices are effective or on the relative impact of different types of a single practice or combinations of practices.

… Schoolwide multicomponent programs require randomization of a relatively large number of schools to treatment or comparison conditions, a costly undertaking (pp. 8 & 23).

Large multi-component interventions have not been quantitatively evaluated either as a whole, or, as Agronick and colleagues state, in part. A practical problem with district-wide or school-wide interventions is that the financial cost and personnel time of these
interventions are so great that they dissuade low-resource districts and schools from undertaking them. Recommendations by Henderson and colleagues (2007) include:

“Family Center is always open, … Home visits are made to every new family, … Parent coordinator is available if families have questions or need help, … Resource center for low-income families is housed in a portable classroom next to the school (pp. 15-16).”

Epstein and colleagues (2009) state:

> At the district level, funds are needed to support the salaries of a director and facilitators who help all schools develop their partnership programs and for program costs (e.g., staff development and training workshops on school, family, and community partnerships; parent coordinators or liaisons to serve as ATP chairs or co-chairs) (p. 21).

Epstein and colleagues also recommend a labor-intensive advisory structure, including on-going highly active committees for each of six major types of PI. Low-resource districts cannot afford to initiate and sustain additional programs out of their normal operating budgets. Additional organizational structures require staff time from staff who are already stretched thin, and dedicated personnel and volunteer training and supervision require financial costs for districts with already high student to teacher ratios. In low-resource districts, the Epstein approach would require many people to work many 12-hour days without compensation. This is not realistic.

The PI field needs a new perspective on the dominant paradigm that interventions should be conducted on a large scale. The large scale interventions are prohibitively expensive to evaluate, and too expensive for many districts to implement and sustain out of regular operating budget funds. Utilizing the leadership theory of “small wins”
(Kouzes & Posner, 2007), educators in low-resource districts and schools may find it more practical to attempt to initiate change in PI by implementing low-cost, highly effective classroom-level interventions. From a research perspective, the identification of an effective low-cost specific intervention to promote PI at the classroom level would greatly simplify the task of designing and implementing a longitudinal study of the hypothesis that PI promotes student achievement. Such studies would permit evaluation of specific types of PI interventions to identify which types were most strongly associated with student achievement. This study’s literature review will focus on research on specific classroom-level interventions to increase PI, and not on the much wider topics of school-level and school district-level interventions.

**Parent involvement organizing conceptual distinctions.** As described in the first chapter, the most commonly used PI typology is the six categories defined by Epstein and colleagues: (a) Parenting (educational expectations, supervising time use); (b) Communicating (parent or school initiated contacts about academic performance); (c) Supporting school (volunteering); (d) Learning at home (academic lessons, music lessons, discussions about school); (e) Decision making (parent organization involvement); and (f) Collaborating with community (museum visits, girl scouts) (Epstein et al., 2009). The literature also distinguishes between at-home PI such as discussing school activities and monitoring out of school activities, and at-school PI such as contacts with school staff and attending school events (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Trusty, 1999). This dissertation study used at-home parent/child interactive homework assignments as part of an intervention to promote parent/teacher communication. The Federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) defines parent involvement as:
The participation of parents in regular, two-way, meaningful communication involving students’ academic learning and other school activities. The involvement includes ensuring that parents play an integral role in assisting their child’s learning: that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child’s education at school; that parents are full partners in their child’s education and are included, as appropriate, in decision making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child (Part A, Section 9101[32]).

While much of the PI literature, such as the handbooks of Epstein and colleagues and Henderson and colleagues, tends to non-judgmentally promote all forms of PI, NCLB prioritizes bidirectional communication and partnership. The proposed study will evaluate an intervention to promote bidirectional communication and partnership.

**Parent involvement theory.** As described in Chapter 1, Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005) and Mapp (2003) present analyses of parent motivation for PI. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues propose a psychological theory to explain why parents become involved. They argue that the main factors influencing PI at-school and at-home are parental beliefs and perceptions concerning parent role, self-efficacy, invitations for involvement, and available resources for involvement. Mapp argues that an additional variable strongly promotes PI at-school: parents’ perception that school staff have positive attitudes toward parents and their children. This researcher prepared Figures 2.2 and 2.3 below to represent these theoretical analyses.
As cited above, Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues acknowledge that their work is based upon studies of involved parents, not uninvolved parents. Mapp presents the best practices of a school that had at least some contact with 90% of its parents, but she did not interview from the 10% of parents who were unengaged by these practices. Epstein et al. (2009) state that their handbook will guide schools to engage all families, not just those that are easy to reach. It is surely true that schools that have and use all the resources Epstein and colleagues recommend will engage a large number of parents, but no specific strategies are presented or evaluated for involving parents unengaged by whatever level of planned PI activities are implemented. There is a discrepancy between current PI research methods and the claims and goals of the PI literature. All PI advocates state that since PI is associated with SA, engaging uninvolved parents of low-achieving
students should be a priority. However, the PI research literature is largely silent on the
evaluation of specific strategies to involve previously unengaged parents. There are no
research studies that attempt to measure pre-existing lack of PI, and evaluate the
effectiveness of an intervention to initiate PI, particularly within a low-resource, low-
income, minority, and immigrant community. This dissertation study utilized the
theoretical constructs described above to interview parents not known by school staff to
have at-school PI; identified these parents’ PI attitudes and practices; asked about their
barriers to PI; and asked their advice on overcoming these barriers.

**School staff perceptions of parent involvement.** Three qualitative studies
argued that school staff are likely to have unfairly negative views of PI among low-
income minority parents. Jackson and Remillard (2005) interviewed eight mothers and
two grandmother caretakers of low-income African-American elementary school
students. These parents were identified from at-school participation in parent events held
for parents whose children were participating in an academic enrichment program. They
found that these parents engaged in a wide range of at-home PI activities. This finding
was intended to counter the view among school staff that low-income, minority parents
who are not highly visible to school staff are uninvolved and are deficits or barriers to
their children’s education. Lareau and Horvat (1999) interviewed 12 White and 12
African-American parents of elementary school students with a focus on understanding
problems in at-school PI. Nine White parents were middle class and three were working
class. Among African-American parents, three were middle class, four were working
class, and five were poor. Due to a community history of racial segregation, many
African-American families approached the school system with distrust. These parents had
difficulty complying with the school staff’s expectation for an appropriately involved parent, which is someone who is positive and supports the school staff. Parents who expressed critical views in contacts with school staff were perceived as having negative PI, even though the critical parents viewed their involvement as positive. The authors argue that being perceived as having positive PI is a social and cultural capital asset for parents, and enables these parents to advocate more effectively for their children. Lawson (2003) interviewed 13 low-income African-American parents of elementary school students. Six parents were highly involved at the school. Lawson spent a week of knocking on doors and used the assistance of the school’s parent advocate to recruit seven parents who did not have at-school PI and were willing to be interviewed. Lawson found that all 13 parents had positive PI role construction. Many parents struggled with poverty, and stated that keeping children safe in the community, providing food and clothing, and getting their child to school were PI achievements. The parents strongly wanted improvement in positive parent/teacher communication. Teachers in the school tended to view an appropriately involved parent as one who is visible to the school and is supportive of the school. Although all the parents regarded themselves as involved, the teachers made a sharp distinction between involved and uninvolved parents. Lawson concluded, “… teachers’ deficit orientations toward parents contribute to a fairly systematic silencing of the strengths, struggles, and communitycentric worldviews evident in the parents’ narratives” (p. 116). This researcher found echoes of parents in these three studies in her parent interviews in Phase 1 of the dissertation study. A decided difference is that these three studies focused on understanding “the problem” of parents who are perceived as uninvolved or inappropriately involved by school staff. The
interviews in Phase 1 of the dissertation study were focused on laying the groundwork for an intervention that would help address the problem of the lack of positive communication between parents and teachers.

**Parents who work long hours.** An additional qualitative study interviewed Chinese-American immigrant parents for whom working long hours was a barrier to PI (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009). This type of parent is largely missing from the PI literature. For example, a widely cited study by Muller (1995) used data concerning 8th grade students from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS: 88) to find that mothers employed part-time, as compared to mothers not employed or employed full-time, tended to be in families with higher family incomes, greater parental education, greater percentage of two-parent families, greater maternal involvement in their children’s education, and children with higher 8th grade mathematics test scores. NELS: 88 had three categories for maternal employment status: 35 or more hours per week, part-time, or not employed outside the home. The survey did not have a separate category to capture parents who work very long hours. The study by Ji and Koblinsky is the single study reporting on parents in this category. The authors interviewed 29 Chinese-American recent immigrant parents in Washington, D.C., who primarily worked in restaurants and hotels. The majority of study participants worked six days a week for more than eight hours a day, and had family incomes under $20,000 per year, even though both parents worked in 25 of the 29 families. Forty-one percent reported spending less than one hour per day with their children, and 69% stated that demanding work schedules were barriers to greater involvement in their children’s education. In the district in which this dissertation study was conducted, there is a small but significant percentage of parents,
typically immigrants, and often the single parent in the family, who may work 60, 80, or more hours a week at one, two, or three low-wage jobs. Some parents are home health aides who may work five continuous days as live-in attendants at their employers’ homes, and then return to their own homes. Students in these families are difficult to identify, since they are often embarrassed to disclose their family circumstances. Teachers reported that parents who work long hours were among the more difficult to engage in this study’s Phase 2 intervention.

**Quantitative evaluation of PI interventions.** There are only two published comparison group quantitative assessments of classroom-level PI interventions for middle school students. In both studies, TIPS was the independent variable, and student and parent reports of at-home PI was a dependent variable. Balli, Demo, and Wedman (1998) reported a study in which a single 6th grade math teacher distributed handouts containing TIPS assignments to 74 White, middle class students that required students to interact with a family member. One group of students received TIPS handouts with no prompts to involve a family member, a second group received handouts with prompts to involve a family member, and a third group received handouts that included the prompts, requested family member comments on the assignment, and requested a parent signature on the assignment sheet. Findings indicated that the second group had more family involvement than the first, and the third group had more family involvement than the second. The students were given 20 TIPS assignments over a 3-month period and had a 100% homework submission rate. Although the study by Balli and colleagues was primarily quantitative, it is a mixed method study since it also included follow-up collection of qualitative data. Families of all 74 students were asked to participate in
follow-up interviews, and 24 were interviewed by telephone. Interview notes were examined for common themes: 16 of 24 said that time constraints made it a challenge to assist their children with homework, 10 of 24 said that they had difficulty with the level of math in the homework, and 16 of 24 appreciated having structured homework assignments.

Van Voorhis (2003) conducted an intervention that used TIPS weekly interactive science class homework assignments with 253 6th and 8th grade students. The study population was 53% White, 36% African-American, and 11% other. Three teachers each taught both TIPS and non-TIPS classes. Students received weekly TIPS assignments for 18 weeks and had a 74% homework submission rate. The study found improved family involvement in homework and student achievement among 6th and 8th grade students receiving TIPS assignments, in comparison to 6th and 8th grade students who received equivalent assignments that did not request the assistance of a family member. In both of these studies, the at-home PI of homework assistance was a PI dependent variable. Neither study sought to obtain or measure teacher/parent bidirectional communication as a PI dependent variable.

A study published in 2007 evaluated a classroom-level PI intervention for first year high school students that was similar in scale and design to the above two studies and to the intervention conducted in Phase 2 of this dissertation study, and was implemented with a predominantly low-income minority population. Shirvani (2007a; 2007b) conducted a study in which 30 9th grade algebra students in two classes were given monitoring sheets twice weekly for 12 weeks to be signed by their parents. Each sheet reported recent homework grades (30 assignments over the 12 weeks) and student
level of conduct and engagement in the classroom. In comparison to 22 students in two control group classes who did not receive the monitoring sheets, intervention group students had higher homework grades, higher scores on a math test at the end of the 12 weeks, and fewer conduct-related problems in the classroom. Among students with overall course grades lower than 75 for the 12-week period, lower-performing intervention group students had higher grades than lower-performing control group students. The four classes were taught by the same teacher, and intervention/control class assignments were randomly selected. If the student did not return a signed monitoring sheet, the researcher (not the teacher) called the parent to provide the homework grade and conduct and engagement information on the monitoring sheet. The study sample was 55% African-American, 35% Hispanic, and 10% White; and 90% qualified for subsidized lunch. The independent variable was the use of the monitoring sheet to keep parents informed of student homework grades and classroom behavior, and the dependent variables were homework grades, exam scores, and classroom behavior.

**Strengths and limitations of these quantitative studies.** Balli and colleagues and Von Voorhis compared differences between intervention and control parents in at-home PI using student and parent reports. An advantage of this method is that student and parent reports may be compared for corroboration. A disadvantage is that the outcome in question was observed only by the family members. The study by Balli and colleagues may not be generalizable to low-income, minority students, and the use of only one teacher means that the study does not fully meet U.S. Department of Education criteria as having an appropriate design to establish the intervention as “evidence-based” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). A limitation of the study conducted by Von Voorhis is
that school classes in this study were segregated by five levels of student ability: inclusion, low-ability, average, honors, and gifted. The lowest inclusion and highest gifted level classes were not included in the study. Consequently, caution should be used in generalizing findings to schools that do not track students and have blended classes that include lowest-achieving students. Shirvani used a form of at-school PI (unidirectional communication of written information from the teacher to the parent) to promote improvement in academic achievement and classroom behavior. Limitations of this study are that it used only one teacher and had a small sample size. A strength is that the intervention measured student conduct in the classroom.

The comprehensive literature review of Hill and Tyson (2009) on PI and academic achievement among middle school students used explicitly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria that were met by only 50 studies between 1985 and 2006. The large majority of these were correlational studies; the only two peer-reviewed intervention studies included were those of Balli and colleagues and Von Voorhis. Inclusion criteria were: (a) the study used a measure of parental involvement and academic achievement (which included homework grades); (b) the population studied was middle school students; (c) the report included sufficient information to measure an effect size; and (d) the study focused on a specific PI strategy. Studies were excluded if they demonstrated a lack of overall face validity by not assessing PI as defined by prevailing theories. The Phase 2 study in this dissertation met these criteria, and had certain strengths relative to the studies of Balli and colleagues and Van Voorhis. The Phase 2 study was conducted in an almost entirely minority middle school with untracked classes taught by three different teachers that contained both regular and special education students. The study included a
measure of pre-existing at-school PI, and measured the effect of teacher outreach on the outcome variables of parent/teacher bidirectional communication, as well as homework submission rates and homework grades.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This dissertation study is designed to help fill three gaps in the literature: (a) an absence of quantitative studies that evaluated whether PI interventions actually increase PI; (b) with the exception of the aforementioned studies, there are few quantitative evaluations of the effectiveness of classroom-level interventions to engage parents of middle school students in at-school PI; and (c) a shortage of qualitative and quantitative studies on interventions to engage previously uninvolved parents. The study also addressed the practical question of evaluating a low-cost intervention to initiate parent/teacher partnership.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

General Perspective

The problem addressed by this dissertation research project is that although parent involvement (PI) is associated with student educational achievement, many children who most need PI support do not receive it. PI initiatives in low-resource, immigrant, minority school districts often fail to engage a significant percentage of parents as partners in working to improve their children’s education. The primary research question for this study was: Can a low-cost intervention consisting of a focused teacher outreach effort and the use of student/parent interactive homework assignments succeed at initiating bidirectional parent/teacher communication with previously uninvolved parents of 8th grade students in a largely immigrant, minority school district?

This dissertation study uses a mixed method approach. Phase 1 of the study is a qualitative assessment of factors that may be reasons for lack of PI among parents of 8th grade students in a low-income, minority school district. Phase 2 is a quantitative evaluation of an intervention to initiate at-school PI among these parents. This study is action research: parents in Phase 1 and teachers in Phase 2 both contributed to the development of the Phase 2 intervention.

Phase 1 of the study interviewed parents to assess parent attitudes and practices toward PI at-home and PI at-school, assessed the extent to which four theoretical constructs in the PI literature were present among these parents, and used these data to help develop the Phase 2 intervention to promote the PI at-home activity of helping with
homework and the PI at-school activity of teacher/parent bidirectional communication. Three of the theoretical constructs – PI role construction, PI self-efficacy, and PI invitations – are described in the work of Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005). The theoretical construct of parent perception of school staff as being caring and trustworthy is described in Mapp (2003). The purposes of the qualitative approach in Phase 1 were to assess the acceptability and feasibility of the intervention planned for Phase 2, and to obtain information that would improve the effectiveness of this intervention.

In Phase 2, the researcher worked with three 8th grade English teachers to plan Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) homework assignments that require that students in all classes and their parents work together to complete the assignment (Epstein et al., 2009). For students in one randomly selected class for each teacher, the TIPS assignments were a basis for a teacher outreach intervention to parents to obtain phone conversations between teacher and parent on student academic achievement. Hypotheses to be tested were: (a) A greater proportion of parents of intervention class students will have had bidirectional communication with the teacher by the end of the seven-week intervention period than parents of control class students will have had; (b) A greater proportion of parents of intervention class students will have had positive contact with the teacher by the end of the intervention period than parents of control class students; (c) Intervention class students will complete more TIPS homework assignments than control class students; and (d) Intervention class students will have higher homework grades than control class students. This is a quasi-experimental design since the study is randomized at the group level and outcomes are compared between subjects. The independent variable in the hypothesis is the strategy of teacher outreach that will be
provided only for the intervention classes. The main dependent variable is the specific at-school PI activity of teacher/parent bidirectional communication. The purposes of the quantitative approach in Phase 2 were: (a) to help fill a gap in the literature on the quantitative evaluation of whether PI interventions succeed at increasing PI, and (b) to provide parents, teachers, schools and districts with evidence-based guidance on how to improve PI among middle school students using a low-cost intervention.

**Research Context**

Both study phases were conducted at a middle school in lower Westchester County, New York. The U.S. 2000 Census reported that 60% of the school district’s 68,000 residents are African-American, 29% are White, and 10% are Hispanic of any race. The district occupies only four square miles, and the community has historically had difficulty maintaining a tax base that is sufficient for its public services. Sixty-three percent of its housing units are renter occupied. The district’s median household income of $49,700 is half the median household income for Westchester County as a whole. The district’s secondary schools do not have a positive reputation in the community, and historically there has been a drop in district enrollment from 6th grade to 7th grade as parents transfer children to private schools. Recent audits by the New York State Department of Education identified numerous deficiencies in the district’s secondary schools, and resulted in mandated programs to remediate these deficiencies. This is a low-resource school district that has experienced repeated budget freezes and cuts, and does not have the resources to implement and sustain PI programs that require substantial funds and substantial use of school personnel time. The district receives grant funding for special programs, but the programs typically end when the funding period ends.
Research Participants

Both study phases were conducted at the larger of the district’s two middle schools. The demographic profiles of 8th grade students at both middle schools are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

*District Middle School Student Population Demographic Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>School 1</th>
<th>School 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total 8th grade enrollment</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American non-Hispanic</td>
<td>187 (87%)</td>
<td>249 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>19 (9%)</td>
<td>68 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White non-Hispanic</td>
<td>8 (4%)</td>
<td>27 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or other</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>103 (48%)</td>
<td>161 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>111 (52%)</td>
<td>188 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>38 (18%)</td>
<td>74 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learner</td>
<td>5 (2%)</td>
<td>33 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>8 (4%)</td>
<td>15 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Daily Attendance (9/13/10 - 10/6/10)</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School classes are not tracked by student ability. Special Education students are mainstreamed into regular classes with support. The majority of students are first or second generation immigrants, predominantly from Caribbean and Latin American nations. In the smaller school, 82% of 7th and 8th grade students receive free or reduced
price lunch. In the larger school, 70% of 7th and 8th grade students receive free or reduced price lunch. Many students enter 9th grade in the districts’ high schools academically and socially unprepared for high school studies. In 2009-2010, the larger of the district’s two high schools had 575 9th graders and retained 258 (45%). The smaller high school had 244 9th graders and retained 78 (32%). District 9th grade enrollments are higher than district 8th grade enrollments because of 9th grade retention from the previous year.

Phase 1 study participants. In March, 2010, the larger school provided the researcher with a list of more than 300 8th grade parents who were not known by school teachers or counselors to have had at-school PI in the current school year. Forty of these parents were randomly chosen to receive an IRB-approved letter inviting them to participate in an interview on parent involvement. A $20 reimbursement was offered to each interview participant. The objective was to conduct face-to-face audiotaped interviews with 15 to 20 parents. Twenty-one interviews were conducted, and four of these interviews failed to record. The responses of the parents in the four interviews that failed to record were not materially different from the responses in the recorded interviews. Data analysis was conducted using the 17 recorded interviews. Demographic data were collected regarding parent gender, age, race, number of adults in the home, number of children in the home, gender of child in the 8th grade, and years of residence in the community. Fifteen parents were African-American, one was Hispanic, and one was White. Fourteen interviews were conducted with the student’s mother, one with the grandmother, and two with both mother and father. Six of the 8th grade children were female and 11 were male. No family had more than three children in the home, and the mean length of community residency was 19.4 years.
**Phase 2 study participants.** For Phase 2 of the study, the researcher worked with the principal of the larger middle school to engage three 8\textsuperscript{th} grade English teachers to participate in the project. In the summer of 2010, the researcher worked with these English teachers to plan TIPS homework assignments to be administered during seven consecutive weeks in November and December, 2010. In September, due to enrollment changes in the middle schools and teacher seniority policies, one of the three original teachers was transferred to the district’s other middle school, and was replaced by a different teacher. This new teacher joined the project. The three teachers respectively taught four, three, and two 8\textsuperscript{th} grade English classes. At the end of October, 2010, each teacher had one class of students randomly chosen to receive the teacher-to-parent outreach intervention. Students in the teachers’ other six classes did not receive the teacher-to-parent outreach intervention. All classes in the study received one TIPS homework assignment each week during November and December requiring that the student and a parent work together to complete the assignment. Homework assignments were the same in all classes. Included with the first assignment was a cover letter explaining the purpose of the TIPS homework with a request that parents sign each submitted assignment. The cover letter for the intervention classes included the statement that the teacher intended to contact the parent or guardian to discuss the weekly assignments.

A total of 192 students participated in the Phase 2 study. Table 3.2 presents student population demographic data for gender and race/ethnicity.
Table 3.2

*Parent Intervention Project Student Demographic Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>% Intervention</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>% Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number Students</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>131</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>67.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were 61 students in the three intervention classes and 131 students in the six control group classes. The intervention group was evenly divided by gender, but the control group was majority female. The control and intervention groups were similar in race/ethnicity. Since the Phase 2 study was the evaluation of a classroom activity, it was granted an IRB exemption from the requirement to obtain informed consent.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

The Phase 1 parent interview instrument is attached in Appendix A. Interviews were semi-structured and organized around the four theoretical concepts of role construction, self-efficacy, invitations, and perceptions of levels of care and respect among school staff. As the instrument was developed for this study, its test-retest reliability has not been measured. The instrument’s validity is guided by its use of four
theoretical constructs identified in the PI literature. All parents interviewed readily understood these four constructs as aspects of PI in their day-to-day lives.

For Phase 2 data collection, the researcher worked with the English teachers to prepare a data entry sheet for each study class that included student name, student gender, student race/ethnicity, a code for the class teacher, a code for the specific class period, seven data entry cells to indicate the completion of each weekly TIPS assignment and grade, a data entry cell indicating whether the parent had any form of positive contact with the teacher, and a data entry cell indicating whether the teacher at any time had a conversation of five minutes or more with the parent concerning student academic achievement. A sample data collection sheet is attached in Appendix B. The researcher worked with school staff to prepare log sheets for all parent events and parent organization meetings during September through October.

**Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

**Phase 1 data collection and analysis.** The interviews were conducted by the researcher. With parental permission, each interview was audiotaped. The audiotapes were used to transcribe parent answers to demographic and other categorical questions, as well as significant comments. These abbreviated transcripts were reviewed to obtain summary demographic data, identify proportions of parents with specific answers, and identify common themes organized around the four theoretical constructs. This information is summarized in Chapter 4 below, and was used to assist the implementation of the intervention in Phase 2. This is basic qualitative analysis as described by Creswell (2009). This summary of the researcher’s understanding of what the data mean is supported by de-identified quotations from participants, and expresses different ways in
which participants understand PI. One advantage of this type of qualitative research is that it uncovered a dramatic difference between school staff perception of PI and parent perception of PI. School staff were asked to provide the researcher with a list of parents who were not known to have had at-school involvement in the previous year. Parents interviewed were randomly chosen from this list. However, nearly all parents interviewed reported some form of at-school involvement, and in most cases discussed their at-school involvement in some detail. The phenomenon of school staff underestimating PI is mentioned frequently in the PI literature (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawson, 2003; and Jackson & Remillard, 2005). In many cases, apparently, the school’s teachers, principal, and guidance counselors did not remember their contact with the parent. Interpretation of Phase 1 data resulted in assigning different meanings to the Phase 2 intervention: instead of “involving the uninvolved” and “creating at-school PI”, it was “promoting parent/teacher partnership among parents not perceived by the school as involved” and “creating more effective at-school PI.”

**Phase 2 data collection and analysis.** The researcher monitored completion of the teachers’ data sheets from September through December. Teachers maintained logs of each class in which they entered student gender, student race/ethnicity, grades for each of the seven homework assignments, a yes/no box if the parent attended a parent night event, a yes/no box if the teacher had any contact with the parent, and a yes/no box if the teacher had a conversation of at least five minutes with the parent. The intervention consisted of teacher effort to contact the parents of intervention class students by phone. The purpose of the contact was to have a five minute or longer conversation with a parent concerning the homework assignments and the student’s overall progress in the class.
Shorter conversations or conversations primarily on discipline or attendance problems were not counted as meeting this definition. Each teacher was instructed to spend no more than an average of three hours per week in the outreach effort.

The school held three events during the first two months of the school year to which parents were invited. The district Parent Liaison supervised parent sign-in at each event. At the end of the study in December, data from the sign-in sheets were used to complete the yes/no box on the class logs if the parent attended at least one event.

**Homework grading rubric.** The teachers decided that if the student completed the entire sheet correctly it would be graded a 10; completion of half the sheet would be graded a 5, and no sheet submitted would be graded a 0. If the sheets were divided into sections, then 2 points would be deducted for each incomplete section. Since there were grades of 7 and 9 in the final data, the teachers in actual practice apparently gave partial credit for some sections, instead of simply grading each section as 0 or 2. To conduct the data analysis, homework assignment grades were assigned to one of three categories: not submitted (grade = 0), partial credit (grade = between 3 and 8 clustering about 5), or full credit (grade = 9 to 10).

Teacher log sheet data on student/race ethnicity were compared to student registration records, which report the parent’s statement about student race/ethnicity. In accordance with New York State policy, the parent’s statement is the race/ethnicity of record, and this was used to correct teacher data for approximately 20 students. These corrections increased the proportion of Hispanic students. At the end of the intervention period, data were entered into an Excel data base with each subject assigned a unique numerical identifier. The data base included a yes/no box indicating whether the student
was in a control group class or an intervention group class. Three control group students and one intervention group student who were transferred out of their English classes during the study period were deleted from the data set.

The outcome data are categorical. The teacher either had or did not have five minute conversations with the parents, and either had or did not have any contact with the parents. Students either did or did not submit homework assignments. Parents either attended or did not attend a parent night event. Consequently, analyses of possible significant differences in these data report the Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result, p-value, and, where appropriate, phi coefficient. Student clustered grades were analyzed categorically: not submitted, partial credit, or full credit. The analysis of student grade data reports the chi-square test result for linear trend in proportions and p-value. Epi Info Version 3.5.3, published and distributed by the Centers for Disease Control, was used to conduct chi-square tests for the binary categorical outcome variables of parent/teacher five minute conversation, any parent/teacher contact, homework submitted, and parent attendance at a parent night at the school. Epi Info was used to conduct chi-square tests for linear trend of proportions for homework grade outcomes of not submitted, partial credit, and full credit.

In March, 2011, the researcher conducted debriefing interviews with the English teachers to obtain their overall assessment of the effectiveness of the TIPS assignments and the parent outreach intervention. Results of these debriefing interviews are described in Chapter 5.
Chapter 4: Results

Research Questions

The problem addressed by the dissertation study is that although parent involvement (PI) is associated with student educational achievement, many children who most need effective PI support do not receive it. PI initiatives in low-resource, immigrant, minority school districts often fail to engage a significant percentage of parents as partners in working to improve their children’s education. The primary research question for this study was: Can a low-cost intervention consisting of a focused teacher outreach effort and the use of student/parent interactive homework assignments succeed at initiating bidirectional parent/teacher communication with previously uninvolved parents of 8th grade students in a largely immigrant, minority school district?

The study used a mixed method approach. Phase 1 of the study was a qualitative assessment of factors that may be reasons for lack of PI among parents of 8th grade students in a low-income, minority school district. Phase 2 was a quantitative evaluation of an intervention to initiate at-school PI among these parents.

Phase 1 Data Analysis and Findings

Phase 1 of the study interviewed 17 parents to assess parent attitudes and practices toward PI at-home and PI at-school, assessed the extent to which four theoretical constructs in the PI literature were present among these parents, and used these data to help implement the Phase 2 intervention to promote the PI at-home activity of helping with homework and the PI at-school activity of teacher/parent bidirectional
communication. Three of the theoretical constructs – PI role construction, PI self-efficacy, and PI invitations – are described in the work of Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005). The theoretical construct of parent perception of school staff as being caring and trustworthy is described in Mapp (2003). Phase 1 hypotheses were that homework assignments that required parent assistance would be acceptable and feasible and that outreach by the teacher to have bidirectional communication with the parents would be acceptable and feasible. These hypotheses were confirmed. The Phase 1 interviews also succeeded in obtaining information that guided implementation of the intervention.

Although school staff stated that the parents on the list provided to the researcher were not known to have had at-school PI in the previous year, nearly all parents interviewed reported some form of at-school PI, and a majority reported bidirectional communication with at least one teacher. The phenomenon of school staff underestimating PI is mentioned frequently in the PI literature (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawson, 2003; and Jackson & Remillard, 2005). All parents reported a willingness to have bidirectional communication with the teacher. A majority of parents reported regularly or occasionally helping with homework. Several of those who did not help with homework expressed frustration that their child did not bring any home, either because the child managed to complete homework at school, or because (it was suspected) the child did not complete homework assignments.

**Interview themes.** This section discusses the four theoretical constructs as they emerged during the interviews.
**Role Construction.** All parents interviewed regarded involvement in their child’s education as something that they should do, and that all parents should do. All parents expressed a willingness to have telephone conversations with the teachers. Several parents said that the child needs to see evidence of PI to believe that the parent cares about school achievement. The majority of parents had some form of at-school PI. Although the school staff told the researcher that the parents on the list were not known to have had at-school PI in the past year, three-fourths reported talking to a teacher in the past year by phone or in-person, and three-fourths reported attendance at some at-school event in the past year. The majority of parents had some form of at-home PI. Two-thirds reported working with their child on homework in the past year. One-third included as education at home advising their child on attitude and behavior toward teachers and other students; one-third reported encouraging education by providing rewards for doing well in school; two said that participation in church and church-sponsored activities were educational experiences; and one told her child to put school before games and took her child to “free stuff” in the community such as the library or the park. Two parents mentioned the adolescent need for increased autonomy as a reason why their at-home involvement was less than it had been when the children were younger.

One parent volunteered that as part of her educational involvement she tells her son that, “For him to be a Black man he has to be ten steps ahead of everyone else.” This is an example of a PI role construction described by Sanders (1997), who interviewed 28 African-American 8th graders and found:

… evidence that despite racial discrimination, many African Americans possess an achievement ethos that demands commitment to excellence for both individual
and collective mobility, … which allows African-American students to respond to racial discrimination in ways that are conducive rather than detrimental to academic success. … These students indicated that they had gained an awareness of racial discrimination and racism through their observations of and conversations with their parents, who either explicitly or implicitly transmitted their racial attitudes and coping strategies to their children through positive racial / ethnic socialization (pp. 85 & 90).

**Self-efficacy.** In terms of parental self-efficacy for homework, eight parents reported that they had difficulty with some subjects. One of these parents has another adult in the home help with math. Six reported other problems related to homework, such as a child with poor grades never bringing home any homework or the child’s inability to bring reference books home. In terms of self-efficacy for at-school PI, a majority said that they were comfortable asking teachers and staff questions. Parents with limited or no involvement at school cited factors such as not being able to drive, lack of proximity to the school, difficulty in attending events between 4 pm and 8 pm, having two jobs, notices about events that arrive after the event has occurred, and involvement at a sibling’s school. Several parents said that school events are sometimes well organized, and sometimes not – which results in the event not being a good use of their time, and discourages them from attending future events. Eleven parents said that they were pressed for time to be involved, although they still made the effort to be involved.

Eight parents emphasized that more parent/teacher communication was needed, and that it should be as early as possible if there are problems with the student’s work or behavior. These parents felt that they could be more effective in addressing their
children’s needs, if awareness of these needs (such as lack of effort in the classroom) was communicated to them in a more timely way. One parent said that she regularly contacts teachers by phone or email, and that they appreciate her checking up, although they do not call her.

**Invitations.** Approximately half the parents reported invitations for involvement or attendance at an event from the school, from a teacher, or from the child. A number of parents said that they did not recall receiving school invitations. There did not seem to be a consistent pattern of invitations from the children or from the teachers. Parents stated that some teachers issue written or verbal invitations, and other teachers do not. A few parents indicated that they were only contacted by a teacher when the child had a behavior problem. Although all parents should receive some invitations from the school, parent reports of these invitations are inconsistent. Either these invitations were not received by the parents, or the parents did not remember them.

**Care, Respect, Trust.** More than half the parents interviewed indicated that school staff were adequate or better in caring for children, being trustworthy in terms providing a safe and effective educational environment, and in respecting parents and listening to parents. Some parents spoke of appreciating a teacher who had an understanding of their children as individuals. However, one-third said that some teachers and staff just go through the motions to collect the paycheck. “Some care and some don’t,” was a common refrain. Several said that some teachers and staff were lacking in respect for parents and a willingness to listen to parents and to children. Several stated that in their personal experience, they had received respect and a willingness to listen, but indicated that this may not be true of all parents. One-third of the parents were very critical. The critical
parents often said that school staff did not promptly identify and respond to children’s problems. Three parents said that PI is necessary because the school cannot be relied upon to do things right. Two parents said that school staff are consistently negative about their child.

Four parents strongly urged improved training for children with special educational needs, including more timely assessments and more appropriate class placements. These parents had had negative experiences in this respect, and felt that school staff made insufficient efforts to properly recognize and respond to children’s special needs. Six parents said the school and community are deficient in providing afterschool activities, and one urged career counseling. These parents felt that the school should do more to support their children’s education and healthy development, and as a result they tended to perceive the school as uncaring and untrustworthy.

**Summary of Phase 1 Results**

The parents interviewed indicated that they would welcome increased opportunities for at-home PI such as parent/child interactive homework assignments; and would welcome increased bidirectional communication with their child’s teachers early in the school year. The parents interviewed had positive role constructions for PI. Many parents identified barriers and issues that limited their self-efficacy to assist with their children’s education. Not all parents reported consistent invitations to assist with their children’s education, and different parents gave a range of positive and negative responses about their perceptions of the school staff in terms of trust, care, and respect for parents.
Certain conclusions were drawn for the purpose of guiding the implementation intervention used in Phase 2. The teachers were informed that the two main hypotheses of Phase 1 were confirmed so that they would conduct the intervention with enthusiasm and confidence. Parents wanted the opportunity to assist with homework, particularly if the assignments could be given out with sufficient completion time so that the parents could fit in the homework help session at their convenience. The intervention asked that teachers move out of their comfort zone: they were asked to be active rather than passive in engaging parents in bidirectional communication. The finding that all parents wanted this contact was reported to the teachers to help overcome any reluctance. The teachers were told that parents appreciated a teacher who could discuss their child as an individual. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues hypothesized that teachers would be more effective at increasing PI if they had positive beliefs about the efficacy of specific PI strategies (2002). TIPS was presented as an effective strategy for increasing the at-home PI of helping with homework. Although Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues do not discuss a concept of “parent invitation to the teacher” (as opposed to child, teacher, or school invitation to the parent), the Phase 1 study was used to create a sense that parents were inviting outreach from teachers for bidirectional communication.

**Phase 2 Data Analysis and Findings**

The main hypothesis to be tested was that: (a) the teacher would have a bi-directional conversation of at least five minutes duration with a greater proportion of intervention class parents than with control class parents. A major review of the parent involvement literature (Agronick et al., 2009) pointed out that no studies have been conducted to determine if outreach to parents actually results in greater parent
involvement. This study proposed to determine if teacher outreach would increase a specific form of parent involvement: parent bidirectional communication with the child’s teacher.

Additional hypotheses to be tested were that: (b) a greater proportion of intervention class parents would have some type of contact with the teacher (either the five minute phone conversation or any other contact, such as a conversation of less than five minutes by phone or in person at a parent night event); (c) intervention class students would submit a greater proportion of their homework assignments; and (d) intervention class students would have higher grades on the homework assignments.

Table 4.1 presents the data for the main hypothesis that the teacher would have a bi-directional conversation of at least five minutes with a greater proportion of intervention class parents than with control class parents.

Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent/Teacher Bidirectional Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main hypothesis was confirmed: the difference between the proportions of intervention class parents and control class parents (90.2% vs. 25.2%) who had bi-
directional conversations with the teacher was significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 70.40 (df = 1), p < .001, phi coefficient = .607).

Table 4.2 presents the data for the second hypothesis: a greater proportion of intervention class parents would have some type of contact with the teacher than control class parents.

Table 4.2

*Parent/Teacher Any Contact*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Parent/Teacher Any Contact</th>
<th>Parent/Teacher No Contact</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second hypothesis was confirmed: the difference between the proportions of intervention class parents and control class parents (95.1% vs. 45.8%) who had any contact with the teacher was significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 42.45 (df = 1), p < .001, phi coefficient = .471).

Table 4.3 presents the data for the third hypothesis: intervention class students would submit a greater proportion of their homework assignments.
Table 4.3

*Homework Assignment Submissions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>HW Assignment Submitted</th>
<th>HW Assignment Not Submitted</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>682</td>
<td>662</td>
<td>1,344</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third hypothesis was confirmed: the difference between the proportions of homework assignments submitted by intervention class students and by control class students (63.7% vs. 44.7%) who submitted their homework assignments was significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 42.0 (df = 1), p < .001, phi coefficient = .177).

Table 4.4 presents the data for the fourth hypothesis: intervention class students would have higher grades on their homework assignments.

The fourth hypothesis was confirmed: intervention class students had higher homework grades than control class students (chi-square test for linear trend in proportions = 62.96 (df = 2), p < .001). The chi-square test for linear trend in proportions was also conducted for both male students and female students. Male intervention students had higher grades than male control students (chi-square = 9.10 (df = 2), p = .003), and female intervention students had higher grades than female control students (chi-square = 32.75 (df = 2), p < .001).
Table 4.4

*Homework Assignment Grades*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Not Submitted</th>
<th>Partial Credit</th>
<th>Full Credit</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Intervention</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Control</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Intervention</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Control</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Intervention</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Control</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>652</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5 presents data comparing attendance at parent night events for intervention and control class parents.

Table 4.5

*Parent Night Attendance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Attended a Parent Night</th>
<th>Did Not Attend a Parent Night</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The difference in proportions in parent night attendance early in the school year for intervention class parents and control group parents (37.7% vs. 31.3%) was not significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 0.76 (df = 1), p = 0.38).

**Summary of Phase 2 Results**

The four hypotheses were confirmed: the intervention had a positive effect on parent/teacher bidirectional communication, any contact between parents and teachers, homework submissions, and homework grades. The two groups of parents did not differ on the independently measured parent involvement variable of attendance at a school parent night.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The problem addressed by the dissertation study is that although parent involvement (PI) is associated with student educational achievement, many children who most need effective PI support do not receive it. The primary research question for this study was: Can a low-cost intervention consisting of a focused teacher outreach effort and the use of student/parent interactive homework assignments succeed at initiating bidirectional parent/teacher communication with previously uninvolved parents of 8th grade students in a largely immigrant, minority school district?

This chapter will discuss the significance of the findings presented in the previous chapter for parents, teachers, principals, district administrators, and educational researchers. Limitations of the study will be presented. Recommendations will be made for actions that can be taken at the family, classroom, school, and district levels, as well as suggestions for further research.

The study used a mixed methods approach. Phase 1 of the study used audiotaped parent interviews to conduct a qualitative assessment of factors that may be reasons for lack of PI among parents of 8th grade students in a low-income, minority school district. Phase 2 was a quantitative evaluation of an intervention randomized at the classroom level to initiate bidirectional parent/teacher communication PI among parents of these 8th grade students. The objective of the study was to evaluate four hypotheses concerning the Phase 2 intervention: (a) The teacher would have a bi-directional conversation of at least
five minutes duration with a greater proportion of intervention class parents than with control class parents; (b) A greater proportion of intervention class parents would have some type of contact with the teacher; (c) Intervention class students would submit a greater percentage of their homework assignments; and (d) Intervention class students would have higher grades on the homework assignments.

Implication of Findings

**Phase 1 findings.** Many students at this middle school are perceived by school staff as having uninvolved parents. Phase 1 of the study provided evidence that the parents of many of these students are involved both at home and at school. Although it is possible that some or all of the 18 parents who did not respond to the request for interviews are truly uninvolved, the parents who were interviewed all take active steps to assist their children’s educational progress. All parents interviewed had a positive role construction for PI. Although Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005) suggest that some parents may need education on PI role construction, the experience of this study suggested that role construction education may be desirable for school staff. One of the three teachers initially needed to be encouraged to initiate bidirectional communication with parents. Existing role construction for many school staff members includes the belief, “Our role is to send letters inviting parents to events. If the parents respond, we will provide bidirectional communication.” This is a role construction that leads to a low level of perceived at-school PI. Of the parents interviewed in Phase 1 who had had positive bidirectional communication with their children’s teachers, the communication was nearly always initiated by the parent.
Parents in Phase 1 often described their PI self-efficacy as being constrained by a range of inhibiting factors: difficulty with subject matter in assisting with homework, children not bringing homework to home, lack of reference materials, transportation or scheduling conflicts for attendance at school events, poor information about school parent events, poorly organized school parent events, lack of time and energy due to other responsibilities, and lack of timely information about student problems at school that need a parental response. The Phase 2 intervention showed that for many parents these barriers to PI may be overcome by TIPS assignments, which do not require reference materials or a high level of subject matter knowledge, and by teacher initiated phone calls that take place when a parent has available time. School personnel can be more effective at responding to parental needs for PI self-efficacy.

The school mails invitations for PI at-school a number of times each year, and also sends them home with the children. Yet many parents said that they did not recall receiving school invitations. It is possible that these parents are underestimating school efforts at PI just as school personnel underestimate parental efforts at PI. School personnel apparently remember parents who make an impression. Parents may need invitations that make a stronger impression, such as homework assignments requiring their help and signature and phone conversations with teachers. Phase 2 of the study used the expressed willingness of Phase 1 parents for bidirectional communication as an invitation for teachers to initiate contact.

The study was conducted in a school district with a history of distrust by many parents and community members. One-third of Phase 1 parents were highly critical of the school, and a number of the other parents volunteered that they knew parents who had
had “bad experiences”. A purpose of the Mapp study (2003) was to identify best PI practices in a high functioning elementary school that served a minority, low-income population. Her conclusion was that despite the school’s many PI activities, the strongest factor promoting PI was the parent’s perceptions of the school staff as caring, respectful, and trustworthy. Although the limited size and scope of this dissertation project prevented pre- and post-measurement of parent and school staff attitudes, a goal was to design an intervention that would promote more positive attitudes between parents and school staff. The TIPS assignments and the teacher/parent dialogues were intended to provide the parent with a constructive experience with the school, and to provide teachers with positive experiences with the parents. Parents interviewed in Phase 1 made it clear that the teacher’s understanding of the student as an individual is a factor that promotes perceptions of the teacher as caring and trustworthy.

**Phase 2 findings.** As predicted by the four hypotheses, the intervention had a positive effect on promoting parent/teacher bidirectional communication, any form of parent/teacher contact, student homework submissions, and student homework grades. This is the first study to actually measure if a PI promotion intervention succeeds in increasing PI. Phase 2 confirmed the Phase 1 statement by parents that they would welcome greater communication with their child’s teacher.

The literature on TIPS (Epstein, 2009) is largely written by TIPS advocates, and much of it is based on districts with higher socioeconomic status (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Von Voorhis, 2003) than this researcher’s district. The dissertation study was in effect an independent study of TIPS’ feasibility and acceptability, and TIPS was found to be feasible and acceptable. Phase 1 changed the meaning of the study
from “involving the uninvolved” to “involving the perceived uninvolved”. Phase 2 did succeed in involving the perceived uninvolved. The difference in attendance at parent nights was not significantly different between intervention and control group parents, yet the teacher outreach engaged 90% of intervention group parents in the at-school PI of parent/teacher bidirectional conversation.

Homework submission rates were 63.7% for all TIPS assignments among intervention class students and 44.7% for all TIPS assignments among control class students. These are much less than what one would hope, although they are not unusual for homework assignments at this grade level in this district. Eighty-four and nine-tenths percent of all students completed at least one TIPS assignment. This dissertation was about the evaluation of an intervention to promote parent/teacher bidirectional communication, and used TIPS as a means to achieve this goal. However, if the intervention were to be used as a regular practice, it would be desirable to identify ways to increase homework submissions. A possible factor for the low overall rates and for the 15% who completed no assignments is that some students apparently do no homework for any classes. Altering this ingrained behavior may require a special intervention. A second possibility may be related to the 10% of parents that teachers were unable to reach to engage in conversations. Some of these cases involved recent changes in phone numbers, or parents not having access to a phone on the job. In this community, there are immigrant parents who work two full-time low-paying jobs or work out of the home at a low-paying job continuously for five days at a time. Parents in these types of situations were more difficult for the teachers to engage, and may be more difficult for the student to engage in homework help. Students were informed of the opportunity to work on the
TIPS assignments with after-school tutors, and a few did this. However, some students are apparently unwilling to take actions that might disclose stressful situations at home.

The initiation of the intervention was delayed so that the independent measure of at-school PI of parent attendance at parent nights could be obtained. Teachers stated that they would have liked to have started TIPS at the beginning of the school term, and perhaps that change would improve homework submissions. (Parents were not assessed on when they would have liked the intervention to start. However, parents in Phase 1 indicated that they would like to develop a dialogue with the teacher as early in the school year as possible.) Teachers selected TIPS assignments from the TIPS CD for 8th grade English that were closest to their curriculum (Van Voorhis & Epstein, 2002). Perhaps with more experience, they could select, adapt, or develop higher interest TIPS assignments.

Phase 2 had a number of positive unanticipated results: Many parents had multiple conversations with the teacher, and continued to have conversations after the seven-week study period ended. The teachers continued to use TIPS assignments after the study period ended. Teachers reported that, “Parents we had never seen before” attended parent night events at the beginning of the spring term, and the parents and teachers were able to match faces with voices. Some parents in the control group or parents of students in other grades heard about the phone calls, and asked school administrators why they had not received the calls. A response that might be anticipated, but was nonetheless gratifying, is that at the beginning of the intervention all teachers remarked, “I’m talking to parents I never talked to before.”
A low-cost intervention to increase PI is feasible, and will be welcomed by teachers and parents. The intervention’s ability to increase the percentage of homework submissions is a positive sign that it can promote the ultimate goal of improving student achievement.

**Limitations**

**Phase 1 Study Limitations.** School staff were asked to provide a list of parents who were not known to have had at-school involvement in the previous year. However, nearly all parents interviewed reported some form of at-school involvement, and in most cases discussed their involvement in some detail. The inaccurate identification of uninvolved parents affected the study’s ability to identify and interview truly uninvolved parents. Forty parents were sent invitations to participate in the interviews. In one case the parent and family had moved out of the community at the time the letter was mailed. Twenty-one of the 39 remaining parents were interviewed. Four interviews failed to record, but the content of the unrecorded interviews was not noticeably different from the content of the recorded interviews. It is possible that the sample of 21 is unrepresentative, and that the remaining 18 parents include parents who are truly uninvolved.

Of 17 parents with recorded interviews, eleven had male children who were 8th graders and six had female 8th graders, which raises the possibility that the interviews are more reflective of PI with male children than with female children. However, interview data showed that parents of children of both genders raised similar concerns.

None of the families interviewed reported more than three children in the home. It is possible that parents with a greater number of children had greater difficulty participating in the interviews.
Among the 17 parents interviewed, 15 were Black, one was White, and one was Hispanic. While this is fairly representative of the distribution of the school’s student population, it suggests that future qualitative studies might attempt to increase representation among minorities within the community.

The mean length of parent residency in the community was 19.4 years among parents who were interviewed, with the four newest families having three, five, six, and nine years residence in the community. The study intended to capture a representative range of parents, but did not interview parents who were new to the community. It is possible that longer-term community residents are more comfortable with at-school PI, such as participation in Phase 1 of the study. Future studies may wish to attempt to increase representation among parents who have lived in the community for two years or less.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher, who is a well-known senior administrator in the district office. This may have affected the interviewees’ responses, although estimating the effect is not straightforward. Some possible biases are toward positive interview content. Some parents may have given positive answers in the attempt to please the interviewer or to avoid conflict. Other factors may have biased the interview toward negative content. Some parents used the interview as an opportunity to express specific grievances or make requests for assistance with specific problems. The opportunity to do so may have had an effect on encouraging parents with these concerns to participate in the project. The researcher desired positive responses concerning parent willingness to provide homework assistance and to communicate with teachers, and this
may have biased responses in those directions. An additional limitation is that use of a single interviewer prevented comparisons that might have identified an interviewer bias.

**Phase 2 Study Limitations.** The study originally planned to have three teachers who each had five 8th grade classes, with one class randomly selected for the phone outreach intervention. However, due to reduced enrollments, the three teachers had four, three, and two 8th grade classes respectively. One of three teachers who had participated in planning sessions over the summer was transferred to another school, and replaced by the teacher who taught the two 8th grade classes. Although this reduced the total size of the control group, the study was intentionally designed with more participants than would be needed to detect an intervention effect. A significant effect was detected for all four hypotheses.

A second limitation is that the teachers planned on using the following scoring rubric: if the student completed the entire sheet correctly it would be a 10; completion of half the sheet would be 5, and no sheet would be 0. If the sheets were divided into sections, then 2 points would be deducted for each incomplete section. In retrospect, this was a flawed rubric from a statistical standpoint. The resulting data would neither be smoothly continuous nor grouped into clearly defined discrete categories (such as pass/fail, or A, B, C, D, F). In their actual grading, the teachers deviated from the planned rubric to assign partial credit for some sections. As a result, there were a great many zeros, and grades ranging from 3 to 10. To conduct the data analysis, homework grades were assigned to one of three categories: not submitted (grade = 0), partially completed (grade = 3 to 8), or completed (grade = 9 to 10). Since the teachers gave continuous grades in actual practice, the original rubric might have accommodated this type of scale.
The data analysis used a scale that did closely match the original intent of the rubric with “not submitted, partially complete, and complete” replaced by “not submitted, partially complete, and complete or nearly complete”.

Teachers entered data on their own performance in terms of conversing with the parent for at least five minutes on the TIPS assignments and student academic progress. Self-reports are subject to bias. It would have been a stronger study to have recorded the conversations and had an independent rater measure the length and assess the content.

The intent of the dissertation was to design and evaluate a single classroom-level intervention that would have a positive effect on PI. However, Phase 1 interviews indicated that parents may need consistently positive experiences with all school personnel to have positive beliefs concerning self-efficacy, invitations, and perceptions of school staff as caring and respectful. The high resource, high expense PI interventions at school-wide or district-wide levels may be more likely to result in consistently positive experiences than single classroom-level interventions with a single teacher.

The study was conducted with 8th grade English class students in a predominantly minority, low-income school district. Results may be different for older or younger students and for students from a different socio-economic background. Results may also vary by subject matter. It may be more challenging to design successful TIPS assignments in math or science.

A delimitation imposed by the researcher is that the Phase 2 intervention did not begin until midway through the fall term. Had the intervention begun in September, it is quite possible that more parents in both groups would have attended the parent nights (to ask about the assignments) and had 5-minute conversations with the teacher. This would
have reduced the effect size difference between the two groups. A second delimitation is that the intervention was conducted for a seven-week period. Studies of TIPS administered the assignments over a longer period of time and found modest improvements in student achievement as measured by student grades or raters’ assessments of writing samples (Van Voorhis, 2003; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997). This was not attempted in the present study because the intervention to achieve bidirectional communication was short in duration and would be unlikely to produce a measurable improvement in marking period grades or test scores.

Although the intervention obtained positive results, 10% of parents (a total of 6) in the intervention did have bidirectional communication with the teacher and 15% of the students (a total of 29) did not submit any TIPS assignments. In retrospect, it would have been desirable to have had an additional intervention component so that a more intensive effort might be made in these situations at the four or five week mark.

**Recommendations**

The guidelines for this section ask for actions that should be taken by organizations and policymakers based upon study findings. However, individual parents and parent groups could take the action of advocating for TIPS assignments and teacher-initiated phone calls. Except possibly for home schooling, PI is not something that exists by itself. PI is dependent upon real and perceived relationships that parents and school staff have with each other. Parents might improve opportunities for PI simply by making their desires for more effective at-home and at-school PI known to school and district staff.
Schools and school districts with perceived lack of PI could change “business as usual” by implementing the Phase 2 intervention. From a practical perspective, it may be too labor intensive for teachers to contact more than one class of parents, at least over a period of a few weeks. However, the telephone outreach could be staggered over the course of the school year. An interesting possibility would be to have all 6th grade teachers in one subject matter have their class loads be reduced by one class so that they could contact all their parents during the school year, and then provide the intervention with a reduced load in the 7th grade for a different subject matter, and so on.

Suggestions for research are for studies that evaluate variations on the grade level, subject matter, and duration of the intervention. The teacher who had only two 8th grade classes also on her own initiative used 7th grade TIPS exercises with her 7th grade English classes, and reported a good response. (This cannot be reported upon in detail because 7th graders were not included in the IRB application.) It is possible that the intervention may have a more positive effect if begun in an earlier grade. Studies of variations on the intervention should seek to improve homework submission rates. Such studies might also seek to improve the effectiveness of the phone calls, perhaps by developing checklists of key points for the teacher to cover. The intervention could be supplemented by the monitoring sheets sent home to parents used by Shirvani (2007a; 2007b), and it is possible that this combined intervention would yield a stronger effect than either intervention alone. Bearing in mind that engagement may be most challenging with lowest income and least educated parents, future studies of parent involvement may wish to study engagement methods that use email and social media.
The significance of this study is that it demonstrates that it is possible to measure a positive parent involvement effect introduced by a targeted parent involvement intervention that also has a positive academic outcome of increasing the rate of homework submissions. Aside from the practice-level value of this finding, it bears upon a major debate in the PI literature concerning the nature of the relationship between PI and student achievement. One position argues that increased PI is associated with improved SA, and that there is preponderance of evidence showing that increasing PI will result in an increased SA (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Epstein et al., 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003; Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Jeynes, 2005; Hill & Tyson, 2009). The second position agrees that PI and SA are associated, but argues that the evidence base for concluding that there is a causal relationship is weak (Agronick et al., 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Mattingly et al., 2002). This debate concerns the interpretation of studies finding that PI and student achievement are correlated. Longitudinal prospective studies with comparison groups have not been conducted to test the causal hypothesis. The intervention evaluated in Phase 2 is low-cost and resulted in significant positive changes in student, parent, and teacher behavior. An evaluation of this intervention over a longer period of time could measure changes in student achievement on standardized examinations, and also measure student behavior to see if improved student behavior is associated with improved PI. If such changes are positive and significant, that might provide evidence for the hypothesis of a causal relationship, and might justify a structural change such as reduced class loads for teachers conducting the telephone outreach intervention. As a candidate for an intervention to be used for research on a wider scale...
and longer duration, it should be noted that the Phase 2 intervention was accepted by
district senior administrators, the school principal, the teachers, and the parents because it
provided a beneficial experience for students and parents in both the intervention and
control groups, as well as providing a professional development experience for the
teachers. Evaluation of the intervention was exempt from the requirement of obtaining
informed consent, which would reduce cost and improve efficiency of a longitudinal
study of this intervention.

It is promising that this first, modest intervention took on a life of its own with
continued TIPS assignments, continued phone conversations, and new attendees at parent
night events. This suggests that a full school year study that pre- and post-tested parent
and school staff might detect significant positive changes in attitudes and perceptions.
For parents and staff of chronically low-functioning school districts, this would be a
welcome change.

Conclusion

Although parents’ involvement (PI) in their children’s schooling is associated
with increased student educational achievement, many children who most need effective
PI support do not receive it. PI initiatives in low-resource, minority school districts often
fail to engage a significant percentage of parents as partners in working to improve their
children’s education. The purpose of this dissertation study was to develop and evaluate a
low-cost intervention to increase PI in their children’s education. Phase 1 of the study
was a qualitative assessment of factors that may be reasons for lack of effective parent
involvement among parents of 8th grade students in a low-income, immigrant, minority
school district. Phase 2 was a quantitative evaluation of an intervention to initiate
parent/teacher bidirectional communication among these parents. Although strategies for increasing PI have been published (Henderson et al., 2007; Epstein et al. 2009), there has been little quantitative evaluation of the effectiveness of these approaches at increasing PI or improving academic outcomes. These strategies are designed to be implemented at district-wide or school-wide levels, which entail substantial financial costs and personnel time requirements that dissuade low-resource districts and schools from undertaking them.

Both study phases were conducted at a middle school in lower Westchester County, New York. The U.S. 2000 Census reported that 60% of the school district’s 68,000 residents are African-American, 29% are white, and 10% are Hispanic of any race. This is a low-resource school district that has experienced repeated budget freezes and cuts, and does not have the resources to implement and sustain PI programs that require substantial funds and substantial use of school personnel time. In the fall of 2010, the middle school where the study was conducted had 349 8th grade students. Seventy-one percent were African-American, 20% were Hispanic, 9% were White or Asian, and 46% were male. Twenty-one percent were special education students and 9% were English Language Learners, and these students are mainstreamed into regular classes with support. A majority of students are first or second generation immigrants. Seventy percent of all students in the school qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

Phase 1 of the study began in March, 2010, when the school provided the researcher with a list of more than 300 8th grade parents who were not known by school teachers or counselors to have had at-school PI in the current school year. Forty of these parents were randomly chosen to receive an IRB-approved letter inviting them to
participate in an interview on PI. The interview was organized using two theoretical
dimensions. The first dimension is a distinction in the PI literature between at-home PI,
such as discussing school activities, helping with homework, monitoring the use of out-
of-school time, or taking children to community cultural events; and at-school PI, such as
contacts with school staff, volunteering at the school, or attending school events. (Ho Sui-
Chu & Willms, 1996; Trusty, 1999) The second dimension is four theoretical concepts
that are believed to be predictors for PI. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005) argue
that there are three critical concepts for parent involvement: role construction, defined as
parents’ beliefs concerning what they should do with respect to their children’s
education; self-efficacy, defined as parents’ beliefs in how effective they can be in
helping their children succeed in school; and invitations, defined as requests from the
child, teacher, or school to participate in some form of PI. The interviews also focused on
a factor that Mapp (2003) argues is critical for PI at-school: parents’ perceptions that
school staff respect parents, care about their children, and can be trusted. The interviews
were used to assess the acceptability and feasibility of the intervention planned for Phase
2, and to obtain information that would improve the effectiveness of the intervention.

Seventeen audiotaped interviews were the basis for the qualitative data used for
Phase 1 of the study. Fifteen parents of these parents were African-American, one was
Hispanic, and one was White. All parents interviewed regarded involvement in their
child’s education as something that they should do, and that all parents should do. Two-
thirds reported working with their child on homework in the past year. Although the
school staff were requested to provide the researcher with a list of parents not known to
have had at-school PI in the past year, three-fourths reported talking to a teacher in the
past year by phone or in-person, and three-fourths reported attendance at some at-school event in the past year. In terms of homework help self-efficacy, eight parents reported that they had difficulty with some subjects. Approximately half the parents reported invitations for involvement or attendance at an event from school, from the teacher, or from the child. A few parents indicated that they were only contacted by a teacher when the child had a behavior problem. More than half the parents interviewed indicated that school staff were adequate or better in caring for children, being trustworthy in terms providing a safe and effective educational environment, and in respecting parents and listening to parents. However, one-third said that some teachers and staff just go through the motions to collect the paycheck. Several said that some teachers and staff were lacking in respect for parents and willingness to listen to parents and to children. The critical parents often said that school staff did not promptly identify and respond to children’s problems. Parents cited barriers limiting at-school PI that included not being able to drive, lack of proximity to the school, difficulty in attending events between 4 pm and 8 pm, having two jobs, notices about events that arrive after the event has occurred, and involvement at a sibling’s school. All parents expressed a willingness to have telephone conversations with the teachers. The two components of the planned intervention – parent homework help and a parent phone conversation with the teacher – were found to be acceptable and feasible. An unexpected finding was that a majority of parents described past year contact with the school in detail, yet they were on a list of parents identified by the school as not having had at-school PI. The phenomenon of school staff underestimating PI is mentioned frequently in the PI literature (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawson, 2003; and Jackson & Remillard, 2005).
Phase 2 began in the summer of 2010 as the researcher worked with three 8th grade English teachers to plan Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) homework assignments that require that students and their parents work together to complete the assignment (Epstein et al., 2009). To obtain an independent baseline measure of PI, a school district employee collected signatures on sign-in sheets for three parent night events held at the school at the beginning of the fall term. The intervention began in late October, 2010, with the teachers giving the students the first of seven weekly TIPS assignments. The three teachers taught a total of nine classes. All students in all classes received the same TIPS assignments. The first assignment was accompanied by a letter requesting that the parent assist with the homework. Just before the TIPS assignments began, one class for each teacher was randomly selected to receive a teacher to parent outreach intervention, and the letters to these parents stated that the teacher would call the parent to discuss the assignment and the student’s progress in the class.

Hypotheses to be tested were: (a) A greater proportion of parents of intervention class students will have had bidirectional communication with the teacher by the end of the seven-week intervention period than parents of control class students will have had; (b) A greater proportion of parents of intervention class students will have had contact with the teacher by the end of the intervention period than parents of control class students; and (c) Intervention class students will complete more TIPS homework assignments than control class students; and (d) Intervention class students will have higher homework grades than control class students. Bidirectional communication was defined as a conversation of at least five minutes duration that did not primarily focus on problems of behavior or attendance.
There were 61 students in the three intervention classes and 131 students in the six control group classes. The intervention group was evenly divided by gender, but the control group was majority female. The control and intervention groups were similar in race/ethnicity. The difference in proportions in parent night attendance early in the school year for intervention class parents and control group parents (37.7% vs. 31.3%) was not significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 0.76, p = 0.38).

The four hypotheses were confirmed: (a) the difference between the proportions of intervention class parents and control class parents (90.2% vs. 25.2%) who had bi-directional conversations with the teacher was significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 70.40, p < .001); (b) the difference between the proportions of intervention class parents and control class parents (95.1% vs. 45.8%) who had any contact with the teacher was significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 42.45, p < .001); and (c) the difference between the proportions of intervention class students and control class students (63.7% vs. 44.7%) who submitted their homework assignments was significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 42.0, p < .001). To conduct the data analysis, homework assignment grades were assigned to one of three categories: not submitted (grade = 0), partial credit (grade = between 3 and 8 clustering about 5), or full credit (grade = 9 to 10). d) Intervention class students had higher homework grades than control class students (chi-square test for linear trend in proportions = 62.96, p < .001).

Implications of the study are that parents have a PI role construction, but schools can assist in overcoming limitations related to self-efficacy, invitations, and perceived lack of respect, care, and trustworthiness. A low-cost intervention to improve PI at-home and at-school is feasible, acceptable, and effective. School staff underestimate the
willingness of parents for PI, and are likely to find greater response than they might anticipate by initiating these activities.

A limitation of the study is that the Phase 1 interviews were intended to capture parents without previous at-school PI. Although the interviews provided information about parents not perceived by the school to have at-school PI, they did not capture truly uninvolved parents. In Phase 2, teachers did not manage to engage 10% of intervention group parents in bidirectional communication, and 15% of all students did not submit a single homework assignment requiring parents to assist the student with the homework. The goal of involving all the uninvolved remained elusive. A limitation of Phase 2 is that the short duration of the intervention did not permit standardized test measurement of academic improvement.

The teachers found that the intervention was a rewarding professional development activity. The project took on a life of its own as teachers continued to administer TIPS assignments even after the seven-week study period ended, conversations between teachers and parents continued, and parents who had not previously attended school events came to parent night during the spring term so that they and the teachers could match voices and faces.

Policy makers should be willing to support the Phase 2 intervention, as the federal No Child Left Behind Act prioritizes greater parent/teacher bidirectional communication. There are at least three possible avenues for further research. First, it would be a straightforward matter to adapt the intervention so that it could be evaluated with different grade levels and academic subjects, and to introduce components to improve homework submission rates. A second avenue for future research is to develop and
evaluate a model that scaled up the intervention so that telephone outreach could be
provided for all students in a given grade level. Third, there has been an extended debate
in the PI literature as to whether the observed association between greater PI and greater
student academic achievement is causal or simply a correlation. The intervention
evaluated in this study could be extended over a longer period of time to determine if the
increase in PI could be sustained and resulted in students achieving gains in scores on
standardized examinations.
References


Appendix A

Phase 1 Interview Instrument

Thank the parent for coming to the interview
Explain the study, ask for signature on informed consent page
Consent signed  Yes  No

Parent Name: ________________
Gender ______
Age __________
Race/Ethnicity __________
Language spoken in home _______
Number of adults living in home ______
Number/Ages of children living in the home ________________
Gender of child in eighth grade __________
Years living in [the community] __________

My study will involve homework assignments that will ask the child and parent to work together, and involve the teacher in talking to the parent about the assignments and about how the child is doing in the class. Studies show that children may do better in school if parents communicate with teachers, but there is not much information about how to increase this communication. I am asking for your ideas about how to make this work.

There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. Parents can do different things with children at different ages, or different things depending on what they feel this particular child needs. So I just need to have you tell me how things are going with your eighth grader.
First, I would like to talk about educational activities in the home. Have you and your child worked together on homework assignments in the past year? 
[If No, have you ever helped your children with homework assignments?]

Do you have difficulty with the subject matter in your children’s courses?

What kinds of things do you do to encourage your child in his or her school work?

Do you talk with your child about the school day?

Do you talk about how well you expect your child to do in school?

Do you discuss report cards?

Are there any other activities that you do to help educate your child? [pause, if no response give examples]: Going to museums, educational movies, trips, concerts, educational games, teach the child to do things such as shopping, home repairs, gardening, sports

Does doing educational things at home make a difference in how well children do at school?
Are these things parents should always do, or only do if they seem to be needed?
Now I want to talk about any contacts or involvement you have had with your child’s teachers or the school. Have you talked with your child’s teacher in the past year? What were these experiences like?  
*If No* Have you talked with your children’s teachers at any time in the past? What were these experiences like?  

Suppose it could be arranged for you to have a phone conversation with your child’s teacher about how he or she is doing in the class. Would you want to do this?  
What kinds of information or ideas should parents and teachers be able to exchange?  

Would you be able to find time to have this kind of phone conversation?  

In the past year, did you go to the school to attend events, such as parent nights or sports events, or to volunteer? What were these experiences like?  
*If No* Did you go in previous years? What were these experiences like?  

Do you feel that talking with the teacher or going to school events are things parents should always do, or only do if they seem to be needed?  
Do you feel that doing these things makes a difference?  

Do you feel you have enough time, energy and opportunity to be as involved as you would like in school-related activities concerning your child’s education?  
If you are not as involved at the school as you would like, what things are preventing you from doing so?
Now I want to ask you in more detail about any specific invitations you may have received to be involved in your child’s education.

In the past year, has your child asked you to help with homework, attend an event at school, or do anything else with respect to his/her studies? [If yes], what was it like?

In the past year, did you receive invitations from any of your child’s teachers to speak to the teacher, or come to the school? [If they simply say yes] Which subject matter teacher was it? How did you respond?
[If you spoke with the teacher, or went to the school] What was it like?

Besides your child’s teachers, did you receive any other invitations from the school to participate in events or other activities at school?
[If yes] How did you respond?
[If the parent went to the school] what was it like?
Now I am interested in your attitudes toward the school.
Do you feel that the teachers and staff care?

How well do they understand your child’s needs?

Can they be trusted to provide a good education?
Can they be trusted to maintain a safe school environment?

Do the teachers and other staff respect parents?
Do the teachers and staff listen to parents?

Are you comfortable asking the teachers or staff questions?

What is your overall attitude toward the school?

What is your overall attitude toward the school system?

[If parents report negative experiences with the school in the past, ask what they think a positive experience should be like.]

Are there any issues I haven’t asked about that you would like to talk about?
Appendix B

Phase 2 Data Collection Sheet

[Sample Data Collection Sheet]

Student name, gender, race/ethnicity, 7 weekly TIPS assignment grades, parent attends at least one parent event at the school, parent has any positive contact with the teacher at any time in the fall term, parent and teacher have conversation on student achievement of at least five minutes duration at any time in the fall term. Teacher will check the parent night box if she observes the parent at a parent event. Parent Liaison will check the parent night box if she obtains the parent’s signature on a parent event sign-in sheet.

Teacher: Ms. Jones  
Class: 5th Period

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<th>Gen</th>
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